

GOD'S INVITATION INTO THE DIVINE LIFE

A THESIS-PROJECT

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BY

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To my best friend and beloved husband, Parkes.

Thank you for being you.

Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.

—St. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*

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ABSTRACT

The Triunity of God is a mystery; not a mystery to be solved, but a mystery to be awed and adored. Yet I also believe it is a mystery that invites participation and transformation into the Christian life. This thesis-project will attempt to relate the significance and potential impact of engaging with God first and foremost as He is in his Triune being. After a theological overview of the biblical revelation, the thesis-project will explore what this reveals about the nature and character of God and explore the possible impact as this is integrated into the life of God's people.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM IN ITS SETTING: ONE IN THREE OR THREE IN ONE?

Introduction

A. W. Tozer wrote these decisive words in his work *The Knowledge of the Holy*: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ When we, as Christian believers, think about God; our worship of God; our relationship with God; our transformation into God’s likeness; what kind of God do we think about? My belief is that thinking of God as he *is*; that is the Triune God, is the most comprehensive and crucial reality of God. It is out of this reality that all worship, study, theology, prayer, ministry, and mission must originate. Yet I do not believe that is the case. The idea that the Trinity might provide a foundation and framework for our lives seems far from many people’s mind and practice, even lifelong Christians. For many years, the theology of the Trinity has been pursued solely as doctrine about God, rather than a lived theology that helps shape believers “to be Trinitarian in their identification of God,” and in their daily life with God.²

While I was in in seminary, I distinctly remember what the bulk of the teaching on the Trinity consisted of as part of my systematic theology class.³ Other than the truth that God existed as three persons in communion, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the main teaching emphasis was on identifying and understanding the difference between the economic (God in his action in

1. Aiden Wilson Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 1.

2. Khaled Anatolios, “Preface,” in *Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Khaled Anatolios (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), x.

3. I attended Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte from 2001-2007.

salvation history) vs. the immanent (God in his being) Trinity. As a new theologian and a rigorous second-career student, I “filed” this systematic doctrine neatly away into my new theological brain. Yet, as time and life and pastoral ministry continued, my thoughts and ponderings about God’s Triune nature regularly came up. As I grew as both pastor and person, I came to appreciate and understand the significance and role of theology as applied to our living, rather than just a knowledge to be attained. I think I intuitively sensed this from the beginning of my journey. When God called me to seminary and subsequent ordination to ministry of Word and Sacrament as a 50-year-old, I had previously worked for some 20 years as a BSRN nurse, specifically in the area of diabetes research.⁴ Interestingly, during my participation in that early theology class referenced above, the pastor at my church took me out to lunch to check in on how I was experiencing seminary. As we sat down at the table, he said “So, Leslie, tell me about your first class!” To which I exuberantly responded, “I am taking *systemic* theology!” He laughed and correcting me saying, “Ah, you mean *systematic* theology.”

As my education and experience as a pastor has unfolded, I am convinced of the wisdom of my misconstrued words. I believe that all of our theology, beginning with the very foundation of who God is; the Triune God, should undeniably be “systemic” and life giving in that way. This was the original intention of theology from its conception. As Dr. Donald Fairbairn notes in his influential book, *Life in the Trinity*, the early church fathers were not so much trying to write a doctrine as they were challenged to attempt to explain and communicate the impact of the Gospel so that it made sense in their current life experience.⁵ Unlike our world today that has

4. I attended Vanderbilt university and received a BSRN degree which is a Bachelor of Science Registered Nurse.

5. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 5-6.

been impacted by missteps in Christian history, or the Enlightenment and its impact of modernity and rationalistic thought, the early writers of theology were attempting to articulate what their recent world had experienced in the historical reality of Jesus Christ and the incredible impact his life, death, resurrection, and ascension had on the current culture and present experience of humankind. Fairbairn writes, “In a nutshell, the way the early church avoided the problem of divorcing doctrine from Christian life was by understanding all of Christian life in direct connection to God’s life.”⁶ Their articulated theology was not *about* God; their theology and doctrine was their understanding *of* God, who through the coming of Jesus Christ to earth, invited humanity, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, to share in the divine life. These early theologians who wrestled with articulating the doctrine of the Trinity believed that “God was working with us to teach us something, to get our attention through the Christian story, including those elements of the story that make the least sense to us. They were interested in forming us as excellent persons. Christian doctrines aim to be good for us by forming or reforming our character; they aim to be salutary.”⁷

As Karl Barth concisely states, “We can only understand how God is knowable from the way He actually gives Himself to be known.”⁸ In that profound statement we find the “both/and” of God’s revelation; both his being (himself) and his story (to be known). This then, is where one ought to begin the journey of their life with God; with his Triune self. Yet in our current day, I do not believe that is the experience for many committed, evangelical, orthodox Christians; me, (prior to my passion for reading, studying, teaching, and preaching on the Trinity) being the first!

6. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 6.

7. Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), v.

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1957-2010), II/1, preface, vii.

The premise in this thesis-project is that a Christian's approach and engagement with God is enriched when God is known first and foremost as He is - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Problem

Having established the primacy of this doctrine, let us now turn to the problem that this thesis-project is addressing. My hypothesis is that Christians, even those life-long mature Christians, do not often engage Trinitarian theology in the life-giving way that it can be experienced. I have received many bewildered gazes and rolling of eyes from friends, family, and parishioners as I begin to walk down this road in conversations about the Trinity. My experience tells me that most Christians affirm the doctrine but haven't spent much time thinking about how this doctrine forms and informs their lives. Actually, I believe that when most Christians think of God, they begin by thinking of God as one and then affirming that he is one-in-three, rather than primarily thinking of God as three persons, who are united as three-in-one. Clearly one can approach God in either way, but I believe that beginning with the three rather than the one, brings a deeper, more enriched communion with God that spills over into all of life.

J. I. Packer says that there are some parts of Christian doctrine, like the Trinity, that are similar to the catalytic converter of a car. "Drivers know it's 'in there somewhere' and the car probably couldn't function without it. But if ever asked to explain exactly what it is and how it works, they wouldn't know where to start."⁹ In the same way, the doctrine of the Trinity is merely that 'catalytic converter' to most lay people and to many pastors. They know of it, but it has little impact on their life with God or their worship of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is what Packer calls a "*theologoumenon*," that is something that orthodox Christians assert, but

9. J. I. Packer, "God's Triple Team," *Leadership* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 67.

perhaps do not understand.¹⁰ As Eugene Peterson writes, “Trinity isn’t something imposed on us, it is a witness to the co-inherence of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the co-inherence of our lives in the image of God (where we are, what is happening, and who we are as we speak and act and engage in personal relations with one another).”¹¹ For those with no faith, or perhaps new in the faith, the subject of the Trinity may be far from their minds, and almost like an impossible puzzle with an endless search of a solution. Yet for those mature Christians with a longtime relationship with God in Christ, although they may certainly affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, they in some ways fall short of living their life actively and energetically in the love of the three-in-one. Is it really transforming to know God first and foremost as an eternal exchange of love in perfect relationship, before also knowing God as the sovereign and powerful creator, redeemer, and judge that he is? Is God more approachable as three than one? Does our experience of God’s presence in Word and Sacrament become richer through a Trinitarian lens? The times and energies that I have invested in pondering the mystery of the Triune nature of God have been the very doorway into a transformation in my own life and ministry. Thinking and knowing God first and foremost as he is, Triune, has in many ways made my systematic theology systemic. I cannot say for certain that this would be the same for others, but my belief and the supposition of this thesis-project is that it can be. It certainly has been for others throughout the history of the church. Listen to some of their words.

In Augustine’s massive work, *De Trinitate*, he writes,

This covenant, both prudent and pious, I would wish to enter into in the sight of the Lord our God with all who read what I write, and with respect to all my writings, especially such as these where we are seeking the unity of the three, of Father and Son and Holy

10. J. I. Packer, “God’s Triple Team,” 67.

11. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 5.

Spirit. For nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or search more laborious, or discovery more *advantageous*.¹²

Tersea of Avila, a nun of the sixteenth century penned these words:

My soul began to enkindle, and it seemed to me I knew clearly in an intellectual vision that the entire Blessed Trinity was present...all three Persons were represented distinctly in my soul and that they spoke to me, telling me that from this day I would see an improvement in myself in respect to three things and that each one of the Persons would grant me a favor: one, the favor of charity; another the favor of being able to suffer gladly; and the third, the favor of experience in this charity with an enkindling in the soul.... It seems those three Persons, being only one God were so fixed within my soul that I saw that they were such divine company to continue it would be impossible not to be recollected.¹³

John Owen, a Puritan pastor of the tumultuous mid-1600s wrote two scholarly works on the Trinity; *opera Trinitas* on the unity and indivisibility of the Trinity, and the other, *appropriationes personae* on the appropriations of the persons of the Trinity. It was in pondering this mystery of three-in-one that for Owen, and I would dare say for each of us, discovers that communion with God lay at the heart of our knowing God. Owen writes: “farther drives on the truth that lies under demonstration; there being such a distinct communication of grace from the several persons of the Deity, the saints must needs have distinct communion with them.”¹⁴

Fred Sanders writes about Nicky Cruz’s engagement with Trinitarian theology in his book, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*.¹⁵ Nicky Cruz, a former leader of an aggressive New York City street gang, was known for his significant conversion to

12. Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 68, (italics mine).

13. Anne Hunt, *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 136, quoted in Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), 129.

14. Thomas Russell, ed., *The Works of John Owen* (London: Robert Baynes, 1826), 2.16, quoted in Sinclair Ferguson, *The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen* (Crawfordsville, IN: Reformation Trust, 2014), 42.

15. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 34-38.

Christianity when a young pastor, David Wilkerson, shared the Gospel with Cruz and other gang members. Wilkerson wrote of their transformative experiences in his well-known book, *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1957). Cruz later rewrote the story from his own perspective in his book *Run Baby Run* (1968), where he speaks of the incredible transformative power of being forgiven by the cross of Jesus Christ. Yet, after writing this book, Cruz states that in retrospect “I came to Jesus because I knew He loved me, and still didn’t know anything about God.”¹⁶ Cruz went on to write another book to share what he says is “the single most important fact of his Christian growth”:

Something has emerged in my walk with God that has become the most important element of my discipleship. It has become the thing that sustains me, that feeds me, that keeps me steady when I am shaky. I have come to see God, to know Him, to relate to Him as Three-in-One, God as Trinity, God as Father, Saviour, and Holy Spirit. God has given to me over the years a vision of Himself as Three-in-One and the ability to relate to God in that way is the single most important fact of my Christian growth.

I am not talking about theology. What I am describing is something different than merely believing in the doctrine of the Trinity.... He (God) has taught me to feed off the Trinity for my daily sustenance, rather than just having some vague feeling that the Trinity is somehow true.¹⁷

My hope is that in the scope of this thesis-project, one will discover and affirm, as those before us, the transforming significance of knowing and engaging God first and foremost as Triune, and in so doing, become more and more shaped and reshaped into who we have been created to be; those conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

16: Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 34.

17. Nicky Cruz, *The Magnificent Three* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1976), 16-17.

Background

There has been a resurgence of interest in Trinitarian theology over the last seventy-five years beginning with the work of Karl Barth in the Protestant world and Karl Rahner in the Roman Catholic world. Although ever-present in the writings of the Orthodox world, some authors have become more popular of late such as Bishop Kallistos Ware and John Zizioulas.¹⁸ The reality that this resurgence has taken place across Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant lines is indeed an encouragement in ecumenical ecclesial relationships. My own tradition is from a Reformed Protestant evangelical denomination. I was originally ordained to ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America in 2009; this ordination was transferred in 2013 to ECO, (The Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians). Yet my educational and pastoral experience as discussed earlier, appears to have been somewhat devoid of this acknowledged resurgence. Fred Sanders states that contemporary evangelicals are not known for their Trinitarian theology, either in teaching or practice, but rather are sometimes known for their shallowness in this area.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that while I was in the first year of seminary, I was discouraged from reading Karl Barth. But in my final year, some six years later and working on my final doctrinal statement upon graduation, I was encouraged to read Barth. It was in so doing that I began this journey of a passionate engagement with the Triunity of God. Barth's massive *Church Dogmatics* opens his work not with authority of Scripture, as many evangelical systematic theologies do, but with the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Barth, if we think of God as Almighty *only* in terms of power alone, we miss the very heart of God, who

18. Books reflected upon for this thesis-project: Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press, 1979); John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

19. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 18.

is not just mere might, but who exists in an eternal exchange of covenant love. Lesslie Newbigin upon his return to a post-Christian West in 1974, after a life serving as a missionary in South India, contended that “the ordinary Christian in the Western world who hears or reads the word ‘God’ does not immediately and inevitably think of the Triune Being- Father, Son, and Spirit; (but rather) of a supreme monad.”²⁰ Jack Davis, in his book *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence*, uses the term of the “weightlessness of God,” from David Wells’ book, *God in the Wasteland*, to describe this problem. Davis, with whom I wholeheartedly agree, states that “we now need to consider the ontology of God, that is to say some of the fundamental characteristics of God’s reality that especially need to be refocused and emphasized in the context of a renewal of evangelical worship.”²¹ And I would add here, that our need to be refocused and reality emphasized is not just in our worship, but in our teaching, preaching, and being the church, the body of Christ. Citing these characteristics, Davis speaks of “God as heavy; God as holy; God as joyful; God as beautiful; God as relational; and God as available.”²² Davis writes, “Undergirding these divine attributes is the fundamental reality of the relation and personal character of God’s being. The modern revival of Trinitarian theology...has directed the church to the Trinitarian reality of persons in relation as the ultimate ontological categories.”²³ Indeed, the Triune God!

To appreciate this acknowledged resurgence, I believe we need to understand how the demise of Trinitarian theology took place in the first place. According to Fred Sanders, and I

20. Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 27.

21. John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 48.

23. John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 48.

23. John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God*, 59.

agree to a point, the Good News of the Gospel has always been Trinitarian. Yet, in both my reading and study and in my experience, somehow the Trinity got pushed to the background. To appreciate both this historical and the current trajectory was for me, like opening a can of worms. As I began research for this project and at times got lost in the myriads of articles, book, blogs, and conversations, I came to believe that this resurgence is now seemingly everywhere, and as usual in many theological conversations, there is a great diversity in meaning, interpretation, and application of Trinitarian theology. One must be careful and wise to discern the orthodoxy of various views. “For the present task, the resurgence is understood as having taken place, and now the Trinity’s presence is ubiquitous, often appearing in places it should hardly be.”²⁴ Trinitarian theology has been employed to polarize various egalitarian issues, social issues, and political issues among others. And there is much that travels into a metaphysical, ontological, academic, and philosophical realm that is beyond the scope of this thesis-project. My concentration in unpacking the Triunity of God will be to focus first on “who is this God?” and “what is he like?” (chapter 2), and then “does beginning with God in his Triunity make a difference?” (chapter 3).

Central to my decision to explore this topic as my thesis-project, was the afore mentioned book by Dr. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*. It was in the reading and re-reading of this book, that I came to appreciate his focused and applicable approach to Trinitarian theology. I came to value the depth of Dr. Fairbairn’s knowledge, with his Ph.D. in patristics from the University of Cambridge, his life story of having lived in Eastern part of the world where the patristics were located, and the incredible gift of being able to interpret very difficult concepts in a way that is understandable, relatable, and applicable. Fairbairn, along with other well-known

24. Jason Sexton, “The State of the Evangelical Trinitarian,” *JETS* 54, no. 4 (December 2011): 788, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/60ec250ac1dfdfd128e6dbfb07da6aee/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=47286>.

theologians such as Barth and Torrance, emphasize understanding our Christian faith through the lens of patristic thought. This will be my focus in chapter 2. With the help of Fairbairn, Torrance, and a few others, I will unpack certain significant biblical passages used by the church fathers, that articulate the eternal Triunity of God from the beginning, and what that Triunity reveals about the nature and character of God and life in him. Do we understand salvation as that sacrificial invitation to share in God's life, "to become adopted sons and daughters of God, thus sharing by grace in the fellowship the Son has with Father by nature?"²⁵ This is a much different way of articulating our salvation than using the common evangelical language of being justified before God by the forgiveness of sins. This puts our place before God as a shift in our legal status before the Judge. Certainly, it is true that Jesus died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice and one must never forget the cost of this sacrifice, and it is true that one day we will stand before him as Judge. However, is it more life-giving, more accessible, to approach God through his gracious invitation of fellowship than understanding our status before God in legal terms?²⁶ Do the patristic fathers have something to teach us in how to approach God as he is; a Triune God; a Triune fellowship of love that longs to invite us into that place. My hope in chapter 2 is for the reader to come to a greater place of understanding the biblical basis for the Trinity and how the early theology developed, as well as begin to understand how the separation between theology and life could have developed. Perhaps we have missed a very rich gift in our life with God, by not thinking of first and foremost as He is: an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

25. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 9.

26. Donald Fairbairn, "Revelation Sunday School Class on The Trinity," St John Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, July 31, 2011, recorded lecture.

Chapter 3 will then explore the potential for this transformative nature of beginning with God as three instead of beginning with God as one, as I engage with a variety of writers. Scripture tells us that “But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).²⁷ Or, as paraphrased in *The Message*,

Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are-face-to-face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We’re free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him. (2 Corinthians 3:16-18, MSG)

Acknowledging that transformation is the work of God and God alone, I do not intend to say that simply thinking about God in a different way guarantees transformation. However, even recent studies in neuroscience, (which I will briefly mention in chapter 3), give credence that what you believe about God can actually physically change your brain to bring wholeness and healing.

Yet we must always be humbled enough to acknowledge the deception of attempting to think our way to God in our own strength through Trinitarian theology, as if we might be able to work our way to a more engaging relationship with God. “We are unable to integrate our minds on our own. This is a creative process that God must initiate and vitalize and has.”²⁸ It is only

27. All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

28. Curt Thompson, M.D., *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising connections between neuroscience and spiritual practices that can transform your life and relationships* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2010), 170.

God, who through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has released the power to change and integrate our minds, for God has so designed us for a relationship with himself in the Trinity, that he might engage us in this life-giving way. Thinking about God in his Triunity invites a personal invitational relationship that allows us to participate in his very life. Change happens here in the context of a participatory and living personal relationship with God. Chapter 3 will focus on this thought and engage with various authors who express, in a variety of ways, this participatory nature of our life with God. These will include writings and thoughts by Eugene Peterson, Ellen Cherry, Donald Fairbairn, Thomas Torrance, and Julie Canlis. I believe wholeheartedly with Julie Canlis that, “it is impossible to deny that the concept (and) praxis of participation is at the center of the Christian faith.”²⁹

I am aware of the immensity of this topic and have often wondered what I have wandered into. Yet I so believe that a lived Trinitarian theology is a missing and needed reality in the church today. Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer aptly describes the place I found myself in:

The would-be pastor-theologian wrestles not with flesh and blood, but with institutional powers and academic principalities. In particular, pastor-theologians must fight on two fronts. Pastor-theologians must contend first with the fact that much theology is written by academics for academics (i.e., “professor theologians”). It is often difficult to translate or apply these technical treatments of specialized topics to the everyday needs of one’s congregation. What has Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the persons of the Trinity as subsistent relations to do with visiting a deacon who has just learned he has pancreatic cancer, or the economic Trinity with church members struggling with unemployment? For that matter, what bearing does the doctrine of the Trinity have on the life of the church at all? To think that it has no bearing is as unfortunate as it is false. The doctrine of the Trinity is the lifeblood of the church and has everything to do with the identity and saving work of Jesus Christ, though it is true that professor-theologians do not always make this as clear as they should.... Second, pastors also have to contend with the disciplinary Berlin Wall separating biblical studies and theology that is now a fixture in the academy.... Institutional powers and the academic principalities have put asunder

29. Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 5.

what had originally been joined together under God: theology and church life, biblical studies and theology, pastor and theologian.³⁰

My heart's desire and purpose in this vast expenditure at this stage in my life is that through this thesis-project I might, by God's grace, in some small way bring together theology and life in those I serve.

The Setting

I am currently an Associate Pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. I have been a member of this currently 400-member congregation for over thirty-four years. I have been ordained staff for the last twelve years. I know this congregation quite well! I would describe this church as an evangelical orthodox congregation. Originally Westminster was founded in 1952 by a group of folks coming out of an Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church to align with the Presbyterian Church (US), often referred to as Southern Presbyterians. In 1983 Westminster became a member congregation of the PCUSA, the Presbyterian Church USA, when the two largest branches of Presbyterians re-united (PCUS and UPCUSA).³¹ In 2013, the session of Westminster felt God's call to transfer into the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), which is a new denominational movement of Presbyterians whose mission is "to build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ."³² This was a bold statement of our church in support of historical and traditional

30. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 6-7.

31. Since at least the early 1700s, American Presbyterians have disagreed about many issues that continue to surface with each succeeding generation. Presbyterians have a long history of disagreement, conflict, schisms, and reunions over both moral and theological issues.

32. ECO, "Our Mission," accessed March 19, 2022, <https://eco-pres.org/vision/>.

evangelical values including authority of Scripture, belief in the two central Christian mysteries of Trinity and Incarnation, as well as supporting the essentials of the Reformed tradition.

I give this background to acknowledge that we are a fully Trinitarian church in tenet. We recite the Nicene Creed every Sunday at the 8:30 service and the Apostles' Creed at the 11:00 service, fully affirming our belief in the Trinity. We speak often from the pulpit about the sovereignty and majesty of God, the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. If I were to ask just about any member of our congregation if they believe in the Trinity, they would undoubtedly answer yes. However, how much they actually reflect upon or engage or live into what that actually looks like, would in my experience, most likely be minimal or perhaps misconstrued. I actually had three different people tell me of their excitement to learn that I was working on a "thesis-project about the Holy Spirit." These were all older long-time members, who had been through challenging disagreements during a lay renewal movement about the manifestations of the Holy Spirit as experienced by some in our membership over 40 years ago, even causing some to leave our church. When addressed by these encouraging older members, I simply responded with the fact that it was indeed about the Holy Spirit, but about the Father and the Son as well! I thanked them for their interest and prayers in my thesis-project, but their responses support my assumption that many faithful mature Christians are not aware of what it actually means to think of God first and foremost as Triune.

This assumption was also supported when I carried out my second-year residency project with this congregation, which involved teaching a one-time adult Sunday school class entitled: "How to Nurture Your Life in the Trinity: A Conversation around the Eucharist." In retrospect, thinking I could teach on something so comprehensive in one class was highly presumptuous on

my part, but that experience and their evaluations did open my eyes to several things. First was that many people are hungry and willing to go deeper in their faith, seeking more of God in their life than they are currently experiencing. Second was that many Christians openly acknowledge that they believe in the Trinity, although they do not think “Trinitarianly” in their daily walk with God. And lastly, I realized the difficulty of trying to communicate this enormous and comprehensive mystery in relatable and livable ways.

The Project

I designed my research project with all this in mind. I have labored over this for quite some time with great angst. I loved my recent discovery that Calvin spent over two decades on how to configure his *Institutes*, and in the end finally decided to simply divide it into four parts: The Father, The Son, The Holy Spirit, and the Church. Hopefully it will not take me that long!

I acknowledge that it is important to not have bias in a thesis-project. My personal experience with Trinitarian theology might be mine alone. Yet, as already noted, I believe that not to be the case and strongly believe that Trinitarian theology can be life-giving and enrich and enlarge one’s approach to God. Because of the vast realities that this delves into, I have thought about how best to put legs on this. I have stated that the Trinity is not something that even many mature committed evangelical Christians naturally think about, thus, that is the group I would want to begin with. It would make little sense that “cultural” Christians or “Christmas and Easter” Christians would acknowledge a desire to ponder this type of doctrine. I think that starting with a smaller group of people is best, and if my inclinations are correct, there will be a much broader application in my on-going role as a pastor in worship leading, preaching, teaching and sacramental liturgy in this post-Christian world with the Good News of this Triune God.

As detailed in Chapter 4, my project involved gathering eight women for *God's Invitation into the Divine Life* weekend retreat. These are women from my congregation who from history, relationship, leadership, service, experience, and fruitfulness, speak to a lifelong journey of mature faith exhibited by their flourishing fruitfulness. I also chose women who have a diverse history in their faith journey. Some grew up in traditional denominational churches, others in more non-denominational Bible churches, and their combined histories include a vast array of lay ministry experiences. My belief is that these women would at least understand what the word Trinity means, and at the very basic level would believe and affirm the three-ness of the Godhead.

The retreat includes several different elements based on thinking, practicing, and sharing in community. These are what Kevin Vanhoozer refers to as “Trinitarian Core Exercises.”³³ Over the course of the weekend I plan to teach on the Trinity three different times, allowing for reflective times to follow. I will include some experiential exercises, including a visio-divina time with Rublev’s icon of the Trinity, a brief Eucharist worship service in the Montreat Chapel of the Prodigal, some community-building exercises, as well as attending a public worship service together on a Sunday morning to allow for an opportunity to apply some newfound knowledge and insight in a different setting. The women will sign an informed consent form, fill out a background questionnaire, take a pre-retreat survey, and answer one reflective journal question prior to the start of the retreat. Everyone will keep a journal over the weekend and be asked to continue to have at least a minimum of a weekly entry (six entries) which will be in response to a prompted reflection question that I send will out over the next 40 days. At the

33. Kevin Vanhoozer, “Trinitarian Core Exercises,” *Christianity Today* 62, no.9 (November 2018): 46-50.

conclusion of both the retreat and 40 days post-retreat, the attendees will complete the same survey they completed prior to the retreat as well as answer a few questions.

Chapter 5 will look at the summary and culmination of this collected data and will detail my conclusions concerning my hypothesis. Does thinking first of God first and foremost in his Triunity notably enhance and enrich one's engagement with God? Does using the language of adoption and participation enlarge one's understanding of salvation? How will these results impact my ministry going forward? Could this information be helpful to others in ministry?

The Conclusion

T. S. Eliott wrote in *Four Quartets* "that in my end is my beginning."³⁴ How apt is that truth spoken into this journey. I could summarize the immensity of the Triunity of God with Polanyi's famous conclusion that "We know more than we can tell," or as T.F. Torrance puts it in this context, "Likewise, I believe, we learn far more about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, into whose Name we have been baptized, with in the family and fellowship and living tradition of the Church than we can ever say."³⁵ What these two great minds conclude is that we know more about the Trinity than we can say.³⁶ For all the articulacy and congruence of theology and life that both the early patristic voices and current theologians can give to us, one must always begin with the truth that the Trinity is ultimately *other*; a transcendent mystery that we as finite human beings will never fully comprehend. We must always begin there.

34. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), 129, quoted in Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 1.

35. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: T & T Clark, 2016), 89.

36. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 58.

I remember as a little girl, coming home from third-grade Sunday school, and sitting on the end of my bed, crying in despair. My mother came in and sat on the end of my bed with me and asked why I was crying. My response, which I still remember to this day, some sixty years later, is that I could not understand how God could be three “things” at the same time. This was the beginning of my journey, a journey that must always begin in humility and awe of such a beautiful and self-giving God. We will never fully understand this beautiful mystery in this life.

As Augustine so beautifully states,

What then, brethren, shall we say of God? For if you have been able to comprehend what you wanted to say, it is not God; if you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God. If you have been able to comprehend Him as you think, by so thinking you have deceived yourself. This then is not God, if you have comprehended it; but if it is God, you have not comprehended it. How therefore would you speak that which you cannot comprehend?³⁷

May I always remain humbled in this holy endeavor.

37. Augustine, *Sermon on Matthew 3*, in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 6, 1887, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vii.iv.html>.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Who is this God?

Introduction

To begin with, the Trinity is primarily a fact and not a doctrine. And it is a fact which alone brings God down to our apprehension and into our experience. That God reveals himself to us in his personal divine Word and imparts himself to us by his personal divine Spirit is the basis of all Christian knowledge of God.

—Willaim Porcher DuBose, *The Ecumenical Councils*

The Trinity is the “grammar” for everything else in Christian life.¹ It is the expression of the mysterious revelation of the God who came down to us in Jesus Christ in the gift of the Incarnation, and then came down again in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Engaging with God in his Triune nature is of greatest significance in a Christian’s life with God. It was this expression and affirmation of the Trinity that the early church fathers gave their very lives for. The Trinity must be our foundation for understanding the entirety of our theology and study of who this God is and what this reveals about his nature. “The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.”² However as discussed in chapter 1, I do not believe this is the case in the lives and practice of many evangelicals. Although pondering the Triune nature of God was paramount in early Christianity, as history moved forward, the Trinity began to be either academically dissected into ontological and metaphysical conversations significant in the Middle Ages, or it took a backseat and became more of an

1. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark 2016), 2.

2. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 1.

assumed and accepted doctrine not impacting the whole of theology. During the Reformation, while both Protestant and Catholic groups affirmed the orthodoxy of the doctrine of the Trinity and worked within that framework, the attention at that time appeared to be more focused on soteriology and ecclesiology.³ One noted exception is John Calvin's focus on the theology of participation within the Trinity, which I will address in chapter 3. Centuries later, "Enlightenment epistemology" pushed the doctrine of the Trinity to almost nonessential with little impact on knowledge of God. Philosopher Immanuel Kant claimed that Christian doctrines were merely constructs of the human mind. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the first great post-Kantian theologian placed his writings on the doctrine of the Trinity at the very end of his long treatise, *The Christian Faith*, almost as an afterthought.⁴ This slow demise of the Trinity led to a seemingly growing disconnection of this Triune reality in the Christian life.

In the Protestant world, Karl Barth responded to this overlooked essential doctrine with his significant contribution of *Church Dogmatics*, purposefully placing his doctrine of the Trinity in the *Prolegomena*. This had profound influence on the resurgence of Trinitarian theology. Following Barth was Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner's equally impactful work *The Trinity*, developing Rahner's Rule which stated "The 'economic' Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa."⁵ Theological reflection on the Trinity began with renewed vigor. It was late Catholic theologian Catherine LaCugna who impacted by Rahner, wrote the influential book *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. LaCugna believed that the systematic separation of God's being (immanent or self-relatedness or *theologia*) from God's doing or action (economy

3. Timothy George, "Introduction," in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 10-11.

4. Timothy George, "Introduction," 10- 11.

5. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 22, quoted in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us*, 211.

or *oikonomia*) had led to the Trinity simply being “a teaching about the abstract nature of God.”⁶ Her argument is that the very mystery of God; the *theologica* and *okoinomia*, belong together. She asserts that the Trinity is “a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other.”⁷ Protestant Jason Vickers in his more recent work, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Re-making of Trinitarian Theology* wrote his book to supplement LaCugna’s thesis in a very particular way. Whereas LaCugna’s work specifically addressed this demise of the Trinity in Catholic theology, Vicker’s hypothesis is that “the working out of a distinctively English Protestant version of *sola Scriptura* led to the separation of the immanent Trinity from the economic Trinity in that stream of theology, and thus to the perception in English Protestant Christianity that the Trinity has little if anything to do with Christian life.”⁸ This is important to note as my background and context is English, Protestant, and Evangelical. Is that perhaps one reason in my own life that I had not spent much energy or time reflecting on the Triunity of God?

Historically, Christianity of all traditions have placed Holy Scripture as a preeminent and authoritative source of doctrine and faith. The evangelical movement of the last one-hundred years is known for their declaration of the supremacy and infallibility of the Bible. Yet for some evangelicals, the reality that the word “Trinity” is found nowhere in Scripture, can understandably be a potential reason for a lack of engagement with God as Triune. Yet I believe that to deeply engage the God of the Bible, one must engage God as Triune. “The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast

6. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us*, 1.

7. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us*, 1.

8. Jason E. Vickers, *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Re-making of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xi.

to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation.”⁹ “When we ask: Who is the self-revealing God? The Bible answers in such a way that we have to reflect on the triunity of God.”¹⁰ It is also important to acknowledge that when I speak of the biblical foundations of the Triune God, I am addressing more than simply “proof” texts:

Most evangelical Christians don’t need to be talked into the Trinitarian theory; they need to be shown that they are immersed in the Trinitarian reality. We need to see and feel that we are surrounded by the Trinity, compassed about on all sides by the presence and the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. From that starting point, truly productive teaching can begin.¹¹

It is as we read Holy Scripture reflecting on the Triunity of God, that the true nature and character of God is revealed as we are hopefully moved to a deeper encounter with the living God. T. F. Torrance has much to say to about this reality.

Any faithful interpretation of the Scriptures operates on different levels, the linguistic and conceptual level, but unless the interpreter participates in the movement of God’s unique self-revelation through Christ and in the Spirit, which gave rise to the Scriptures and has left its imprint upon them, he or she will fail to understand them in their deep spiritual dimension and will be blind to their essential truth content.¹²

My belief, like that of Torrance, is that the “truth of the Holy Trinity is more to be adored than expressed,” and that “Holy Scriptures do not give us dogmatic propositions about the Trinity.”¹³ However that does not imply that Holy Scripture does not point us to the revelation of the Holy Trinity. For the ultimate and definitive self-revelation of God is Jesus Christ. And that revelation begins, albeit anticipatory and indirectly, from the very first pages of Scripture. “Long ago, at

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1957-2010), I/1, 301.

10. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 303.

11. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 39.

12. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 38.

13. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, xxxiii.

many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of God the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:1-3a). And thus, we begin with our question of “Who is this God?” in the very beginning!

Old Testament

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:1, 31). Genesis tells us that God is *the* creator of the heavens and the earth. He is a God unlike no other, a God who could bring form and order out of chaos. He is a God who declares himself to Moses in his self-revelation name of Yahweh, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:16). And God declares himself as one God in the most well-known definitive statement of God in the Old Testament, the *Shema*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). So is the revelation of God in this text only emphasizing his monotheistic unity or is it saying something else? Clearly the God of Israel wants His people to know that He is *the* God, desiring undivided loyalty among all the other gods in the ancient eastern polytheistic culture. Isaiah chapters 43-45 are the most extensive collection of verses about the uniqueness of God in the Bible. Several times in these verses are the phrases such as “besides me there is no other god, there is none besides me, there is no other.” There are eleven references to the uniqueness of God in those three chapters (43:10-11; 44:6, 8, 24; 45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22, 24).¹⁴ Clearly the Old Testament speaks to the monotheism of and unity of God in who He is; He is One and unlike any other god.

14. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 39.

So does this imply that we should always approach God first as one in three and not three in one? T. F. Torrance expounds on the name of Yahweh as revealed to Moses, stating that “I am who I am” can also be more fully translated as “I will be who I will be,” implying a more dynamic sense of the divine, a God who is on the move, a living God, a God of relationship and covenant, a God who goes with you (Exodus 3:12).¹⁵ A few chapters over in Exodus God speaks to Moses again revealing this dynamic active nature:

God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord (*Yahweh*). I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, (*El Shaddi*) but by my name the Lord (*Yahweh*) I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, I am the Lord (*Yahweh*), and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God (*Elohim*), and you shall know that that I am the Lord (*Yahweh*) your God (*Elohim*), who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord (*Yahweh*). (Exodus 6:2-8)

Torrance points out once again that in these verses we see God reveal himself as who he really is in his being, in light of his covenant promise for the people of Israel, and in his saving redemptive activity on their behalf. Torrance citing Barth, “This is why, as we have seen, Karl Barth used to speak of God’s Being as his Being-in his-Act and his Act-in-his Being.”¹⁶ God’s ultimate act in his being was in sending Jesus Christ, who clearly identified himself with the “I Am.” This God, this Being, this *homoousios*, of God enlarges our understanding of a God who has always been with us and for us in all of life; he is a living and active God that has existed as he is from all eternity, a God whose plan to save his creation has been there from the Fall

15. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 120.

16. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 120, citing Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1, 257ff.

(Genesis 3:15). I am convinced that the reality of a Triune God can be found buried deep within God's Old Testament self-revelation in his name Yahweh. However, as Fairbairn notes, if God had decided to reveal himself overtly in the Old Testament as the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Jews living in that polytheistic culture would have understood God to be just three more gods of that day; gods like Baal, Molech, and Asherah rather than the holy and other Triune God that he is.¹⁷

Some scholars also believe that one can potentially see some more conclusive hints or traces of the Trinity in the Old Testament, although there is not uniform consensus in this. One of the most well-known references, and one that I encountered early in my desire to reflect more on the Trinity is Genesis 1:26, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness," using plural pronouns. And again, in the fall account, the Lord God said, "behold, the man has become like one of *us* in knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). We find similar language in Isaiah 6:8, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for *us*?" Another indirect hint could be that one of the names used for God in the Old Testament is *Elohim* which is in plural form, "gods." When it is referring specifically to the God of Israel, it has a singular verb or adjective with it as if to say "the gods is."¹⁸ In addition, there are many instances in the Old Testament where God is named or addressed as *Father*, in a variety of historical and prophetic and wisdom books, such as when Moses was speaking to all the assembly of Israel, "Is not he your father, who created you? (Deuteronomy 32:6), and the Lord speaking to Jeremiah, "I am a father to Israel" (Jeremiah 31:9), as well as in the Psalms (68.5), "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation," among many others. In addition is the use of the terms *Son* and *Lord*, and

17. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 42.

18. Donald Macleod, *Shared Life: The Trinity and the Fellowship of God's People* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1994), 13.

Word (Psalm 2:7; 110:1; Isaiah 55.10-11). There are also many references of both spirit and *Spirit* that may infer the Holy Spirit, such as Genesis 1:2, “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters,” and Psalm 104:30, “When you send forth your Spirit, they are created.” Others cite the three “angels” that visit Abraham and Sarah as a possible Old Testament Triune revelation (Genesis 18:1-5).¹⁹

While none of these Old Testament references discussed above clearly state that God is Triune, they at least open the door and providentially anticipate the Good News of the Gospel that is to come in the New Testament.²⁰ B. B. Warfield put it this way:

The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus, the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation that follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged.²¹

Or as John Calvin says it way more succinctly, “Say there is a Trinity of Persons in the one Being of God, and you will have said in one word what the Scripture says and suppressed empty talk.”²²

19. Gerald O'Collins, S. J., *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 20-23.

20. Gerald O'Collins, S. J., *The Tripersonal God*, 32.

21. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 141-42, quoted in Justin Taylor, “...a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted...,” The Gospel Coalition (blog), August 1, 2009, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/chamber-richly-furnished-but-dimly>.

22. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.5., quoted in Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 12.

New Testament

The New Testament opens with “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The entirety of the New Testament is the story of God who for us and for our salvation has chosen to come to us in Jesus Christ. “It is in the Lord Jesus, the very Word and Mind of God incarnate in our humanity, that the eternal God ‘defines’ and identifies himself for us as he really is.”²³ “The whole story of Jesus showed a trinitarian face. In other words, his history transposed to the human level the interpersonal life of the triune God. In particular, he lived in a human way his identity of being the Son in relationship to the Father. Jesus’ life comes across that way— right from his virginal conception.”²⁴ There is an abundance of New Testament texts that one could focus on revealing God’s Triunity and certainly much beyond the scope of this thesis. I am going to focus on some primary ones that speak both to affirming the divinity of Jesus as well as the development of that belief as it was experienced.

Both Matthew and Luke speak of Jesus divine conception through the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:34-35). In Jesus’s baptism, the synoptics all speak of the voice from heaven, and the presence of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:22). As well, the synoptics all speak of Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit into wilderness temptation (Matthew 4:1, Mark 1:12, Luke 4:1). Jesus had the ability to forgive sins that had only been the work of God prior (Matthew 9:6; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20). Jesus himself also perceived of his mission as one who “came” and as one who had been “sent” by the Father (Matthew 23:37-39; Mark 1:38; 9:36-37; 10:45; 12:6; Luke 1:34-35).²⁵ And as he instructed his disciples to continue in his

23. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1.

24. Gerald O’Collins, S. J., *The Tripersonal God*, 33.

25. Gerald O’Collins, S. J., *The Tripersonal God*, 33-41.

mission, he told them to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Of note here is that Jesus uses “name,” not “names,” again affirming the Triunity of God.

It is perhaps the Gospel writer John, more than any other biblical author, who focuses on the divinity of Jesus, along with the presence of the Holy Spirit, in inferring the very Triune nature of God. John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Jesus used the divine name in John 8:58, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am,” and then defines himself in the seven “I AMs,” throughout.²⁶ He says clearly in John 10:30, “I and the Father are one.” And in response to Philip’s question “Show us the Father?” Jesus answers, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-9). And as Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure, he shares with them that “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). And in John 17:24, which we will discuss further in the next section, Jesus speaks of his relationship with the Father from the beginning, “Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

There are many significant Pauline passages that also affirm the divinity of Christ, and again I am choosing simply to cite a few. Philippians 2:5-6, “Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God,” Colossians 1:3, “He is the image of the invisible God,” and Colossians 2:9, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” The writer of Hebrews states, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, (1:3). Paul also identifies the

26. John 6:35; 8:12, 58; 10:9, 11; 14:6; 15:5.

Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ in parallel in Romans 8:9, “You however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” Paul’s well-known benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 reveals and affirms the Triunity of God: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” We can certainly say that the writers of the New Testament affirmed the divinity of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit, yet of significance is that all of the writers of them (outside of Luke), were committed Jews with a firm and zealous belief in the one God of the Old Testament. How could this be?

Gerald Bray discusses how Paul’s devotion to Judaism engages with his encounter with the living Christ. “From the beginning, the Christian knowledge of God in Trinity was first experiential and later theoretical, an order of things that has always characterized authentic Christian understanding and confession.”²⁷ Paul had an encounter with the living Christ (Acts 9) that propelled him to share this truth to the world. This coming of Jesus had brought a new reality that established orthodox monotheistic Judaism couldn’t take in. It was a reality that invited God’s people into his life in a new way. In Judaism, the holy of holies in the temple was the *only* place where *only* the high priest could meet with God to offer sacrifices. Before that, the tabernacle that held the ark of the covenant with the Mosaic law, was carried faithfully through the desert by the Israelites. It was considered sacred and quite inaccessible to the everyday people. Even though God was dwelling with his people as he had promised, they could not connect with him directly or relationally. When Jesus was crucified, the veil in the temple was torn in two (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) and the holy of holies was opened up.²⁸

27. Gerald Bray, “Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity,” in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39.

28. Gerald Bray, “Out of the Box,” 44-45.

To put it another way, whereas ordinary Jews were kept out of the holiest place in the temple, Christians have been admitted into the inner life of God. Only in that context, and based on that understanding, can we reconcile Christian theology with the Old Testament revelation. The God who appears as One to those who view him on the outside, reveals himself as Trinity of persons, once his inner life is opened up to our experience.²⁹

Paul, as guided by the Holy Spirit, articulated in his letter to the Galatian church just what all this meant. It is in this early letter that Paul is attempting to explain this new reality writing “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son, into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6). Galatians is thought to be possibly the earliest book in the New Testament, probably written around 49 CE. making this early Trinitarian text significant. Paul is writing to primarily non-Jews to explain to them that although Christianity’s close relationship with Judaism, it did not mean that they needed to become Jewish or follow Jewish law in order to be Christ followers.³⁰ “Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal Savior who set us free to live a free life...from within.”³¹ Paul points out that Abraham had a covenant relationship based on faith and trust that God would fulfill his promise “to be God to you and your offspring after you,” (Galatians 3:10-18; cf. Genesis 17:7). Paul then exhorts these Galatian churches to trust that this promise had been fulfilled by faith and trust in and through Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16). “Because you are sons” (not servants), here Paul is articulating this new relationship that Christ ushers in. Paul in no way rejects his Jewish belief of the one God of the Old Testament, but expounds that this one God of Israel *is* Abba, the Father God, the name Jesus had called him in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).³² While Paul’s early letter to the Galatians does not

29. Gerald Bray, “Out of the Box,” 45.

30. Gerald Bray, “Out of the Box,” 38.

31. Eugene Peterson, “Introduction to Galatians,” in *Conversations: The Message with its Translator* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), 1817.

define the Trinity, it certainly helps us acknowledge that this doctrine of Triunity was not some theoretical speculation that was conjured up by early Church Fathers. Rather, it affirms that from the very earliest days of Jesus' entrance into history, God in his seeking nature, comes to us, and is inviting us into his inner life to be adopted as his beloved children through his Spirit; that is to know him as the Triune God. This is the same Triune God that has always been and will always be. So, what does that say about the nature and character of God?

What is this God Like?

Introduction

It is foundational to ascertain that knowing God in his self-revelation of Triunity is as I have oft repeated, a mystery. Despite all the biblical texts and empirical doctrine that we can allude to, they do not necessarily lead us to a deeper engagement with the living God. What does the Triunity of God say about God? To even begin to speak of the nature and character of this Triune God almost feels like a bridge too far to cross. Yet I am compelled to ponder what God's Triune nature reveals about the heart of God. Paul writes to Timothy, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16). "The mystery of godliness," is a text frequently engaged by early Christians as they began their initial attempts articulating the Trinity. It is a mystery that calls us to worship. Early on, Church Father Irenaeus, in the middle of the second century, focused on the historical truth and reality of Jesus Christ and the early church's worship of him as Lord and Savior. Irenaeus approached "the being of God through the experience of the ecclesial community, of *ecclesial*

32. Gerald Bray, "Out of the Box," 39-45.

being,” through “the eucharistic experience of the church.”³³ It was in that context of worship that Irenaeus believed, that “there emerged the incipient formulations of belief in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”³⁴ For Irenaeus the truth content of the Gospel was that Jesus was the bridge between the “visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible.”³⁵ “The Lord has taught us that no one can know God unless God himself is the Teacher, that is to say, without God, God is not to be known.”³⁶ Thus it is in that spirit of worship and awe that we move to our next question “What is this Triune God like?” “The worship and doctrine of the Trinity belong together, for it is godly thinking of God in unrestrained awe and adoration of his unfathomable Triune Nature that must guide any move toward formulating a doctrine of the Trinity in terms worthy of him.”³⁷

Clearly to write about the nature and character of God could fill an entire library and take a lifetime to reflect upon! To suit my thesis-project design and time frame, and to hopefully be able to reflect upon this complex topic over a weekend retreat, I clearly had to simplify and emphasize those ideas that would be accessible and life-giving. Over the course of our time together, I attempted to weave together seven overlapping key concepts that the Triunity of God reveals about his nature, essential to which is the transcendent mystery of his existence in the eternal exchange of his love. These were: God is mystery, God is love, God is relational, God is personal, God is merciful, God is beautiful, and God is invitational.

33. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 16-17.

34. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 76.

35. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 77.

36. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 11.3, quoted in Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 77.

37. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 74-75.

God is Mystery

God is mystery. This is always where we must begin.

The language of faith-the language of Scripture-illuminates, enabling the human mind to understand and move toward its true object, God. But this light also illuminates a darkness that lies ahead of us and surrounds us, for it shows to us the limits of our knowledge-or better, it begins to initiate us into those limits, and if we rest on the language of faith, we can be drawn ever more deeply into this darkness. Learning to love not only the illumination but also the darkness, is I suggest, essential if we are to see both what faith is and the importance of decentering our search for knowledge into a search for greater awareness of our own failure and our need for grace.³⁸

Some early theologians expressed their understanding of God with what God is not, known as apophatic theology. Perhaps that was easier than to try and say who God is and what he is like. Any attempt of describing what God is like is limited by our finiteness. God is creator and we are mere creatures. As I cited Augustine's words in the beginning chapter there is a limit to our comprehension. I have a prayer card of Rublev's icon pasted in the front of my Bible with these Augustine's paraphrased words "a comprehended God is no god." Historically, there have been two main perspectives or models in approaching God's Triune nature in what is known as the psychological and social analogies.³⁹ Having been influenced in my life experiences and reading, I acknowledge my bias of social analogies in describing God's nature, beginning with his threeness. That is not to say that we cannot learn of God's nature from both analogies as they serve to complement and correct each other. The danger in the overemphasis of God's threeness without caution can lead some to tritheism. The danger in the overemphasis God's oneness without caution can lead some to modalism. As Fred Sanders writes, "the gospel is Trinitarian,

38. Lewis Ayres, "As We Are One: Thinking into the Mystery," in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 107.

39. The psychological analogies are most closely associated with Augustine and Western trinitarianism. Historically, this begins with God's oneness existing in differentiated but indivisible activities of personhood. The social analogies are most closely associated with Early Church Fathers and Eastern trinitarianism. Historically, this begins with threeness and life in relationship.

and the Trinity is the gospel.”⁴⁰ Yet my belief is that to engage first with the relationality of God’s threeness in oneness, although a mystery, can help us relate to God in deeper ways. But we still acknowledge the limits of our comprehension and the mystery that exists. “To confess that God is Triune is to affirm that God exists in communion far deeper than the relationships and partnerships we know in our human experience.”⁴¹ We should all value the saying of Gregory of Nazianzus, “I cannot think of the one without being quickly encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being immediately led back to the one.”⁴² This indeed is a mystery.

God is Love

At the very heart of the character of God is love. This is a holy love that is like no other. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love,” (1 John 4:8). No human can walk in a room and introduce themselves as “I am love.” This makes no sense. Love is a relational term. Augustine speaks of this in his work on the Trinity.

Yes I can see charity, and to the best of my ability grasp it with my mind, and I believe the scripture when it says the *God is charity and whoever abides in charity abides in God* (1 John 4:16). But when I see it, I don’t just see any trinity in it. Oh, but you do see a trinity if you see charity.... For when we love charity, we love her loving something, precisely because she does love something.... Now love means someone loving and something loved with love.⁴³

40. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 15.

41. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 78.

42. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Holy Baptism*, oration XL.41, quoted in John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.17, quoted in Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 79.

43. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 1991), VIII.v.12, 14, 253-255.

And further on Augustine writes, “Here you are then-when I who am engaged on this search love something, there are three: I myself, what I love, and love itself. For I do not love love unless I love it loving something, because there is no love where nothing is being loved. So then there are three, the lover, and what is being loved, and love.”⁴⁴ What this tells us is that the language of love must have a subject and object of love, such as “Johnny loves Susie.” It requires subject, object, and relationship designator. If God is solitary aloneness, God cannot be characterized as love. For God to actualize this character of love, God would need to have someone/something to love. Understanding God as Trinity helps us understand what “God is love” means. If we affirm the eternity of God, that God has always existed, that means that he has been in a love relationship eternally. God has always existed as within his divine life as an eternal exchange of love.⁴⁵ Jesus’s prayer for his disciples reveals their loving relationship, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me *before the foundation of the world*,” (John 17:24, italics mine). God is not some abstract idea but a loving fellowship of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This love communicates the very heart and essence of God as he is and has always been. This love also speaks to understanding creation. God has created this world and you and me as an overflow of this love. It is a love that is life-giving. God created this world and sent Jesus into this world, solely out of love and grace, rather than out of necessity. Creation and salvation are free acts of God’s freedom to love. This is the kind of God we worship!

44. Augustine, *The Trinity*, IX.i, 2, 272.

45. Stanley Grenz, “What Does it Mean to Be Trinitarian” (lecture, Regent College, September 29, 2004), accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.regentaudio.com/products/what-does-it-mean-to-be-trinitarian>.

God is Relational

Asserting that God is love therefore affirms that God is relational. “God is who He is in the act of His revelation. God seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us, and therefore He loves us. But He is the loving God without us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the freedom of the Lord who has His life from Himself.”⁴⁶ God exists as three equal persons in perfect relationship. With the Church Fathers, Fairbairn believes, and I agree, that all of our Christian life and the theology that defines it, is directly related to the central relationship that exists between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and which, in Scripture, is “particularly expressed in terms of the Father’s relationship to his beloved Son.”⁴⁷ To grasp this truth on our own is impossible. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that this can be known. John 14:16, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.” And it is that Holy Spirit that enables Jesus’s followers to realize that “I, (Jesus) am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20). As Fairbairn writes “In other words, the Holy Spirit is the link between the Son’s relationship to the Father and the Christian’s relationship to the Son.”⁴⁸ The ancient Greek word *perichoresis* (*peri* = around; *choresis* = dance, make room for) has been used to speak of the relational mutuality of the Trinity, and Eugene Peterson speaks beautifully of this metaphor in his book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*.⁴⁹ The word was first used by Gregory Nazianzen in the fourth century to convey the way in which the divine and human natures coexist in the one person of Christ.⁵⁰

46. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 257.

47. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 10.

48. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 24.

49. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005), 44-45.

50. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 102.

Later this word was used in the world of Trinitarian theology in the eighth century by John of Damascus. Barth explains this concept stating that “the doctrine of *perichoresis* states that the divine modes of being mutually condition and permeate one another so completely that one is always in the other two and the other two in the one.”⁵¹ Although this term is not accepted by some current scholars to describe the relations of the inner life of God, I find it to be a helpful picture of describing a complex topic. If one has ever been a student or observer of ballet (I have a daughter who dances), this image of three dancers sharing in reciprocal movement and motions can appear as one unified expression. Another helpful image of the relationality is the triquetra (which is Latin for three cornered) knot, also known as the Trinity knot. The symbol is formed from a single strand that loops to form a triangle shape of 3. The triquetra was first seen in the Celtic culture in the seventh century.⁵² One strand, one being, three triangles, three persons, all interconnected relationally. This beautiful reality that the Triune God is at his core a relational being, overlaps with the reality that this God is also personal.

God is Personal

To have a relationship implies a personal connection. It is important that I continually acknowledge that as I use these terms describing God’s nature, I do not in any way want to anthropomorphize God. God’s “persons” and our understanding of “personal” are on two totally different levels of ontology.⁵³ Yet, as I continue to support my thesis, my belief is that engaging with God first in his Triune nature will enhance one’s personal engagement with God.

51. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 370.

52. I learned more about this triquetra Celtic knot when on a trip to Scotland and the island of Iona. I found this image helpful in my own engagement with the Trinity and received a handmade triquetra necklace from my husband.

53. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 133.

The one Triune Being of God is to be thought of then, as essentially and intrinsically a mutual movement of loving self-communication between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, an intensely personal Communion, an ever-living ever-loving Being, *the Being for Others* which the three divine Persons have in common.... That is the one transcendent personal Being of God who is the creative source of the personal communion, which is his outgoing love for others, he wants to establish between himself and us.⁵⁴

Scripture bears witness that the Triune God is “the living God” (Matthew 16:16), who enters into a living personal relationship with creation and acts in creative, redemptive and transformative ways.⁵⁵ We also see throughout Scripture, a personal God who wants to be known and named. We find multiple names of God from the beginning to the end of the Bible, God as Yahweh (as I discussed earlier), God as El Shaddai, Adonai, Ancient of Days, Alpha and Omega, just to name a few. And ultimately God’s name comes together in the Triune name, when Jesus says to his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).⁵⁶ God is ultimately known through Jesus Christ. It was Jesus’s desire to make this Triune name of God known. In Jesus’ priestly prayer before his way to the cross that he prayed, “O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name and I will continue to make it known that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:25-26). This Triune God of love who exists in perfect loving personal communion and relationship and longs to share that relationship with us, is indeed a beautiful God.

54. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 133.

55. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 76.

56. Stanley Grenz,. “What Does It Mean to Be Trinitarian.”

God is Beautiful

Beauty can certainly be understood only from a subjective stance, such as our current culture that lends itself to the understanding that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Yet if we affirm that God is the creator and maker of all things, then God is the author of beauty. I often repeat the phrase that God is not a theologian, rather he is an artist. But even more than being the author of beauty, God in his being is beauty. Jonathan Edwards acknowledged this beauty that existed in God’s being of himself. “God is God distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above ‘em, chiefly by his divine beauty which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty.”⁵⁷ Edwards spoke of God’s life as a fountain of love living infinitely in perfect love and who is the only being who is perfectly beautiful in his own self.⁵⁸ Karl Barth spoke to this truth as well, “The triunity of God is the secret of his beauty.”⁵⁹ For Barth, who wrote of the attributes of God as the “divine perfections,” looking at the perfect harmony of who God is in himself, reflects his beauty. Historically the attributes of God have been classified in various ways: non-communicable (perfections belonging only to God), and communicable (characteristics that humans can share with God) characteristics; inward and outward attributes; and positive (what God is) and negative (what God is not) attributes.⁶⁰ These scholastic methodologies have often led to unresolved tension in theology and ethics. Barth’s perspective on God’s attributes was to first engage with his Triune nature, which led to an engagement with these divine perfections not in isolation but in dialectical pairs. “Each perfection of divine love is to be set in light of God’s

57. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, WJE 2:298, quoted in Kyle Strobel, *Formed for the Glory of God: Learning from the Spiritual Practices of Jonathan Edwards* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2013), 50.

58. Kyle Strobel, *Formed for the Glory of God*, 50.

59. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 661.

60. John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 51.

freedom, and each perfection of divine freedom is to be set in the light of God's love."⁶¹ From this perspective God's character can be understood as inseparably one of "grace *and* holiness," one of "power *and* love," one of wisdom expressed in "righteous judgment *and* patient love," one who has both "constancy of purpose *and* is ever engaged in new and changing actions to fulfill that purpose," and one whose love is "both vulnerable *and* unconquerable."⁶² These dialectical pairs of God's attributes bring with it a tension of accepting that God can only be what we are not and is demonstrated in the expression of the miracle of the human *and* divine nature of Jesus Christ. This perfect harmony is beautiful indeed.

God is Merciful

"This is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). This belief of what Christ accomplished on the cross is basic to our salvation. Yet if we approach again our understanding of our salvation, first in God's threeness, what does that imply? When God the Son was on the cross, did God die on the cross? And if so, then who was running the world while he was out? I believe that in the aforementioned understanding of God's divine perfections in dialectical pairs, we understand more deeply the mercy of God. "To confess that God is triune is to affirm that the life of God is essentially self-giving love whose strength embraces vulnerability."⁶³ Fairbairn has a mind-stretching chapter on redemption in his book that addresses the question, did God die on the cross? He speaks to early theological teachings of God's impassability (the complete inability to

61. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 84.

62. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 85-86.

63. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 81.

suffer) and how that has influenced our understanding of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf.⁶⁴ I have heard many of my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who say that God cannot suffer. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover this, yet I feel it is significant to think about the breadth of God's sacrifice in the gift of our salvation in the context of his Triunity. Fairbairn's conclusion states,

God can and did suffer by means of the humanity that the Son took on himself at the incarnation. Furthermore, God did all of this voluntarily on our behalf, not because anything external to himself forced him to do this. He chose to have one of the persons, the Son, become human so that in that humanity the Son could suffer and die to bring us back to God. God chose to allow one person of the Trinity, the Son, to undergo alienation from the other two persons in terms of his humanity, even as the Son somehow remained united to the Father and the Spirit in terms of his deity.⁶⁵

The Father heard these words from his beloved Son, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 15:34). Do we really fully understand the depth and cost of God's mercy on our behalf? To ponder this reality speaks deep into the heart and nature of the Triune God. There exists a mutual self-giving love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; a costly self-surrendering love, a love "so amazing, so divine."⁶⁶ And it is because of this love and through this love that we are personally invited into a relationship with the beautiful and mysterious divine life of God.

God is Invitational

"God did not need to create the world to have fellowship with others because eternal communion exists within his Triune nature. The gift he gives us at creation is the invitation, as

64. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 157-183.

65. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 177.

66. Issac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, public domain, 1707.

his image bearers, into full communion with him.”⁶⁷ This idea of an invitation into this communion and the participatory nature of engaging with the Triune God will be unpacked further in chapter 3. It is this reality that is what has brought my theology from ‘systematic to systemic,’ that I referenced in chapter 1. One of the Scripture passages that was frequently mentioned in early church writings on the impact of Jesus connecting human life with divine life was 2 Peter 1:3-4:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

The church fathers used the Greek word *theosis* to articulate this partaking of the divine nature. They did not intend this to mean that we become divine as God is divine, rather that we are invited to share in the relationship that the Son has with the Father. This goes in tandem with the idea of adoption as God’s children that I covered in the first section of this chapter. This is the Triune God’s invitation of “sharing by grace in the fellowship the Son has with the Father by nature.”⁶⁸ This is an invitation into something that I believe can be incredibly enhancing and transformative in our life with God. This will be how we enter into chapter three as we continue to ponder the “who” of the Triune God, “what is he like?” and next, “what difference does this make?”

67. Timothy Tennet, *For the Body: Recovering a Theology of Gender, Sexuality, and the Human Body* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 62, Kindle.

68. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 9.

Conclusion

In God's self-revelation as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we have come to understand the God of the Bible as the God of love, the God of relationship, the God of personalness, the God of beauty, the God of mercy, the God of invitation, and most importantly and always the God of mystery who cannot be fully known on this side of eternity. We are on a journey in this life to know God and be known by God in deeper and more life-giving ways. "For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Having been created in the image of this Triune God, the God who we have come to understand is self-giving, other affirming, and community-forming, we are called to be people through whom this character of God shines.⁶⁹ We have been created for relations of love and self-giving as we participate in God's purpose for us here on earth to bring "thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

69. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 349.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW:
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS MAKE?

Introduction

Repeating the A. W. Tozer quote that I began this project with, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” I now want to reflect, through various authors, the potential impact that is possible when one approaches God first in his Triunity rather than his oneness.¹ Having ascertained that the God of the Bible has revealed himself first and foremost as a God who is love and exists in a personal relationship of love within his being, what does that mean to us? What difference does this make to us as human beings made in his image? How does this impact our identity and purpose in this life? As emphasized throughout this project, knowing about the doctrine of the Trinity is not the same as knowing the Triune God. The church fathers give us insight into what this knowing really means. Knowing for them meant “knowing in wonder. By knowing or perceiving one participates in the life of the other.”² “This is doxological knowledge, knowing God by way of worshiping the Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit.”³ If we begin to grasp that God created us and came to us as an overflow of his being of perfect love within the freedom of his divine initiative, we begin to understand more fully the love that God is.

In the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ and shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit we learn to love the Love of the Father ultimately for himself alone and not for any gain to ourselves. In trinitarian terms this means that the Love of God the Father

1. Aiden Wilson Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 1.

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1, quoted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christian Understandings of the Triunity: The Historical Trajectory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 190.

3. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christian Understandings of the Triunity*, 190.

historically manifest in the economic Trinity directs us back to the Love that God eternally is in himself in the ontological Trinity apart from his relation to the world.⁴

It is this ultimate nature of God's love that also helps us to further understand God's sovereign and omnipotent power. "Thus we do not define God by omnipotence but define omnipotence by the Nature and Being of God as he has revealed himself to us in his creative and redemptive activity. His power is not different from his Nature, for it is the power of his Nature, the power of his Being in action, the power of what he is in his Being and ever will be."⁵

And that Being is a God who is with us and for us in all things we experience in life on this earth as we know it. But for some of us, our understanding of God is more of an authoritarian power or "almighty-ness" who rules in a way that is unrelated to the world and its suffering. James Bryan Smith in his book, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows*, speaks to some of false religious narratives that we have heard from pulpits or classrooms or books that have misled us in our engagement with the Triune God. In order for transformation to take place, Smith says, we must change these narratives to be Jesus' narratives; narratives that reveal the Triune love of the generous God who pursues us and comes to us that we might know him as he is.⁶ "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also" (John 14:7).

What we think about God-what we think God is like-will determine the relationship we have with God. If we think of God as harsh and demanding, we will probably cower in fear and keep our distance from God. If we think of God as a vague and impersonal force in the universe, we will probably have a vague and impersonal relationship with this god. That's why it's crucial that we have the right thoughts about God. It will determine everything we do.⁷

4. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark 2016), 210.

5. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 204.

6. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 19- 26.

Even our physical bodies and minds are impacted by what we think about God as current neuroscience reveals. In Dr. Timothy Jennings recent book, *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life*, Jennings speaks of the change in his own life of moving from his prior faith experience of understanding God's love as authoritative and powerful to a deeper understanding of God's character of never-ending love.⁸ Whereas Jennings, a committed Christian doctor of psychiatry, not of theology, does not speak specifically of the Trinity, he alludes to it. He speaks of his search for healing of his God-concepts, and he begins in the beginning when there was "only God, the eternal triune love."⁹ Jennings goes on to say that "God has written his law of love-his circle of beneficence-in all of nature because it is the design schematic for life's basic operation.... It's a never-ending circle of giving."¹⁰ That indeed is the character of the circle of Trinitarian love. Jennings noted that our beliefs change us not only spiritually, but also emotionally and physically as well. All through the book Jennings explores "the amazing ability of our brains to adapt, change, and rewire based on the choices we make, the beliefs we hold and the God we worship-as different 'God-concepts' affect the brain differently."¹¹

We have been created in such a way to know who we are and whose we are. My belief is that our current culture has lost their understanding of what it means to be a human being made in the image of God. We have been created with a deep longing for communion and belonging. It

7. James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 88.

8. Timothy Jennings, M. D., *The God-Shaped Brain: How Changing Your View of God Transforms Your Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 9-13.

9. Timothy Jennings, M.D., *The God-Shaped Brain*, 21.

10. Timothy Jennings, M.D., *The God-Shaped Brain*, 25.

11. Timothy Jennings, M.D., *The God-Shaped Brain*, 11.

is only in Christ that we embrace our true identity of what it means to be truly human, and only in Christ that we understand the invitation that God so graciously grants to us; an invitation to share in his divine life of this perichoretic love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe participation in the divine life of God makes us more truly human. “We were made for union and participation with God and formation into Christ’s image is the manner in which we live into who we truly are.”¹² Understanding our Christian journey in this way can make a transformative difference in understanding our life with God and his gift and grace of salvation, of sanctification, and of mission and purpose. Each of these topics could be unpacked as individual thesis-projects, and it is not in the scope of this project to address those in depth here. What I will do in this chapter is look at some of the significant literature and authors that speak to our life in the Trinity as it impacts our identity and our purpose of participation in the divine life.

Eugene Peterson

When looking back on my life as a Christian, it was the book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* by Eugene Peterson that initiated my deep yearning to know more of God. I had never heard of Eugene Peterson, and it was in one of my early classes at Gordon-Conwell Seminary entitled Christian Formation that I was instructed to read Peterson’s, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Peterson’s way of writing about the Christian life and discipleship sparked a deep chord within and I was fascinated and drawn into his words. I had no idea what spiritual theology was and was busy learning church history and systematic theology. It was close to five years later and near my seminary graduation that his *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* came out and I decided to buy it and read it. I couldn’t put

12. Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation: An Entry into the Theology of T. F. Torrance*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 250.

it down! And I think I re-read it about five times. At the same time, I was regularly meeting with my mentor and talking about how to get all this information I had learned in seminary from my head to my heart? Peterson's book among others began this journey that I continue on today.¹³

His ability to speak of theology in a way that can be lived was life-changing for me:

The end of all Christian belief and obedience, witness and teaching, marriage and family, leisure and work life, preaching and pastoral work is the living of everything we know about God: life, life, and more life. If we don't know where we are going, any road will get us there. But if we have a destination — in this case a life lived to the glory of God — there is a well-marked way, the Jesus-revealed Way. Spiritual theology is the attention that we give to the details of living life on this way. It is a protest against theology depersonalized into information about God; it is a protest against theology functionalized into a program of strategic planning for God.¹⁴

Specifically intriguing to me was Peterson's priority and foundation of bringing in the Triunity of God in these writings. To be honest, this was something I had rarely thought about. Although I don't think I understood the depth of what he was writing at that time, it certainly unearthed a deep curiosity within me. "Trinity" Peterson writes "is the theological formulation that most adequately provides a structure for keeping conversations on the Christian life coherent, focused, and personal."¹⁵ He noted that the early church made this connection. As I now have a new appreciation for the patristic fathers, I understand more comprehensively what Peterson was saying as the early Christians labored to make sense of both the divinity and the humanity of Christ and expressed that within the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁶ All of our life "takes place in the country of the Trinity."¹⁷ That means all of our lives are present to God in the ways

13. I have read every book that Eugene Peterson has written. The list is too extensive to cite here.

14. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.

15. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 6.

16. Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 53-56.

that God is present and sustaining us, his creation, as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Peterson likens the Trinity as a map of our life with God; giving us insight on how to know and see and find God through the way he reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “The purpose of a map is to show us a way into the country;” the Trinity grants us a way by invitation into the very life of God.¹⁸ And this is a personal relational invitation that comes to us in the God-revealing Christ. “God is only and exclusively God in relationship.”¹⁹ It is only in knowing and loving God and being known and loved by God that we fully begin to understand our life on this earth.

It was Peterson where I first encountered the word *participate* in terms of a relationship with God. This idea brought growth, freedom, and life!:

Trinity is a steady call and invitation to participate in the energetically active life of God — the image of the dance again. It is the participation in the Trinity (God as he has revealed himself to us) that makes things and people particularly and distinctively who they are. We are not spectators to God; there is always a hand reaching out to pull us into the Trinitarian actions of holy creation, holy salvation, and holy community. And God is never a nonparticipant in what he does, nor are any of us.... If we are going to know God, we have to participate in the relationship that is God.... Trinity provides these terms, a theological language that enables us to maintain our Christian identity in God’s image rather than in what we see in our mirrors each morning.²⁰

As I began to engage more openly with these thoughts, I was challenged by my then supervisor, the senior pastor, that in his mind and reading, Eugene Peterson was an antinomian, (which I had to look up in the dictionary). Yet as I read and re-read this book, I repeatedly put Peterson’s words and thoughts to the test in Scripture, in prayer, in other theological reading and

17. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 6.

18. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 7.

19. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 7.

20. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 46.

study, and in my life experience. I grew in confidence of my own identity as made in the image of the Triune God, and beloved by Him. This freed and fueled me to keep pursuing this Triune God, ultimately to this place of study into which I am now engaged.

On a personal note, I had the opportunity while still in completing ordination seminary requirements, to attend a week-long conference, the National Presbyterians Seminarians Conference, at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (June 2007). The main speaker for the event was Eugene Peterson. I introduced myself to this humble, gentle-spirited man, and awkwardly asked if he would sign my copy of his book, *Christ Plays*. I told him what an impact it had on me. As he signed his name, he looked intently into my eyes and slowly asked, “what is your name?” I replied and he said my name out loud once or twice. For the remainder of the conference, he made a point whenever he saw me to stop, look at me, and say, “Hello Leslie.” As chance would have it, we ended up traveling to the airport in the same cab, and we exchanged a few letters over the years as I would share my questions and journey in the “country of the Trinity.” He came to Charlotte to speak at Union Presbyterian Seminary, and I was invited to have dinner with him along with a few other pastors. What I experienced every time I was with Eugene Peterson was a person whose faith was congruent with his actions, whose theology was embodied and lived, a person who was personal, and relational and knew my name; a person living in the image of the Triune God who also knows my name. I am grateful for the impact that Eugene Peterson has had on my life and ministry.

Ellen Charry

I was introduced to Ellen Charry in a footnote reference in my reading for this Gordon-Conwell pastoral theology Doctor of Ministry track. Charry is a professor of systematic theology

at Princeton Seminary. Her most well-known book is entitled, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*. Charry's writing was my introduction to reading at a much higher academic level than I had previously done, with a book in one hand and a dictionary in the other. I learned that Dr. Charry was a second career theologian like myself. She came to Christian faith as an adult with no Christian upbringing. Charry was a social worker in New York and Philadelphia and became disappointed with the limit of her impact within social work. She was the mother of two daughters and was asking deep questions of life. She made her way to Temple's University Department of Religion looking for a way to put her "feet and head together."²¹ Charry was searching for God, yet her "lack of Christian background made her read theology as a life option, not as a set of theories."²² In her past "God" had been more of a high concept that could not be related to. She started with Barth and then as she read back in time to the Reformers, and then the patristics, she began to understand that they sought to explain theology and doctrine in a way "that would help Christians be transformed by Christ's life and therefore flourish."²³ Charry travels at great length through theological history, taking up difficult and abstract doctrines and making the point that these theologians had the spiritual nurture of their readers in mind while they were writing. She challenges current theologians today to keeping theology practical and relevant. She states, "Theology is marginal for the church today because it can't offer spiritual nurture to people. If it could reclaim spiritual nurture as one of its tasks, theology might be able to help the church instead of having to be warded off

21. Tim Stafford, "Ellen Charry: Reclaiming spiritual nurture," *Christianity Today* 43, no.2 (February 1999): 46-49, February 18, 1999, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/february8/9t2046.html>.

22. Tim Stafford, "Ellen Charry," 47.

23. Tim Stafford, "Ellen Charry," 47.

by the church.”²⁴ Charry’s insight helped me to begin to navigate patristic thought and understand the difference in the Western and Eastern approaches to Trinitarian theology.

The patristic age emphasized sapience [wisdom] as the foundation of human excellence. Sapience includes correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known. In the West, knowledge of Gods’ grandeur and wrath inculcated a strong sense of sinfulness in the individual who contrasted him or herself with God. In this view, growth in the Christian life turned on the ability to trust God as a father rather than to fear him as a master. In the East, the emphasis was on likeness to God, by means of which we turn to him from less worthy pursuits. Both traditions, however, insisted that God is the origin and destiny of human happiness, that knowing and loving God are the foundation of human self-knowledge and direction, and that life’s goal is conformation to God.²⁵

Charry disagrees with several current Trinitarian theologians who target Augustine as the one who has led those in the West to construe salvation as forgiveness of sins only, rather than as forgiveness that leads into participation in the divine life.²⁶ In Charry’s view, Augustine suggests that salvation is dwelling in the fullness of God, and she believes his approach contains this holistic approach to salvation that includes forgiveness *and* that leads to participation.²⁷ While I do not agree with some of Charry’s conclusions, she did help me to clarify some of the theological conversations concerning Eastern and Western views of salvation and the Christian life that I had previously read, and that had been difficult for me to integrate.²⁸ When it comes down to it, salvation is “both/and,” both forgiveness of sins and participation in the divine life. But my question remains, from what place do we begin?

24. Tim Stafford, “Ellen Charry,” 48.

25. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

26. In her book she cites these following theologians who take that stance: Rahner, LaCugna, Jenson, and Gunton, all people that have been formative in my hypothesis. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 121.

27. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 121.

28. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 120-152.

Charry published an article entitled *Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity* where she contends that the doctrine of the Trinity can be primary in a believer's spiritual formation because "baptism into the triune life is the foundation of Christian theological identity."²⁹ She speaks to the spiritual crisis of late modernity of human identity that gives way to the autonomous self; a self who is accountable to no one and a self who thinks of any type of doctrine as potentially limiting and repressive. She says, as noted earlier, that she believes the root of this crisis to be the lack of formation through theology properly articulated and understood to be lived. She believes, and I agree, that theology can bring life and flourishing to human beings when thoughtful "doctrinal exegesis" takes place. Charry then takes the reader through an exercise of Trinitarian doctrinal exegesis. She begins with our Christian identity that is grounded in the Triune life of God. In God's divine initiative that God would give God's self to believers in faith and baptism exemplifies the love that is the beginning of Christian formation. "At their best, the spiritual traditions of the church, led by St. Augustine in the West and Maximus the Confessor in the East, have understood that formation can only properly be undertaken through the cultivation of love, not through the imposition of external authoritarian rules."³⁰ God's Triune life with his message in the cross "forms as it informs" of the incredible love of God.³¹ "Our Christian identity is neither self-made nor constructed in the narrative of one's personal history or biology. The dignity of God is given to the individual by and in the sacrament."³² Charry believes that it is in the gift of our baptismal identity into the one God

29. Ellen T. Charry, "Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Theology Today*, 54, no. 3, (October 1997): 367-380.

30. Ellen T. Charry, "Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity," 370.

31. Ellen T. Charry, "Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity," 375.

32. Ellen T. Charry, "Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity," 372.

where our lives are destined to become like the life of Jesus, that we begin to put together the “breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that we might be filled with the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). Charry suggests that this identity is the essence of knowing and loving the Triune God. Christians are baptized into a Triune God that is beyond their understanding. She brings here with the unknowability or mystery of God as one in three, as a lesson in faith of humility; we are creature, God is creator. Augustine struggled in this desire to know more than we as creatures are created to know. “St. Augustine was plagued by the epistemic gap between God and himself all his life. He wanted to love God completely but puzzled at how he could love what he did not know. The reason he wanted to know God was not to gain the power that knowledge brings but in order to love and enjoy God better, to move ever closer to God.”³³ I spoke of Augustine’s understanding of this Triune love in chapter 2. Charry summarizes that our identity in the love of God and the resulting humility in our unknowing of the mystery of the Trinity are the “spiritually formative power of the oneness of God.”³⁴

Charry then speaks of formation by the threeness, or as she calls it, the divine triplicity, of God. In this discussion she identifies the three persons of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. She notes that whereas our created identity begins in the oneness of God’s love,

God knows and understands that we need more help than simply to be created and set going. To this end, God’s own being is structured around our needs. That the Son and Spirit are indeed God and sent into the world to repair us, brings us face to face with our need for precisely the work that God does.... The eternal divine triplicity, which anticipates God’s reclamatory and saving work with us, delimits the scope of human need.³⁵

33. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 374.

34. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 375.

Charry concludes what she called a “trial in pastoral exegesis of the doctrine of the Trinity.”³⁶ “I have argued that the doctrine of the Trinity provides Christians with a knowledge of God that elicits love.”³⁷ Charry believes, and I agree that this love develops a trust and relationship with God that in turn creates our identity and leads to a flourishing and happy (her term) life. She continues that “a pastoral examination of the subjective side of the doctrine of God assumes that the triune God of Christian faith provides an “onramp” to a happy and productive life that can address some of the negative effects of late modern life from a spiritual vantage point.”³⁸

What I agree with and find most helpful in Ellen Charry’s writings and reflections is the significance of doctrinal exegesis as a formative practice, yet I do not necessarily agree with all of Charry’s conclusions and applications in her doctrinal exegesis of the Trinity. I certainly concur that our baptismal identity is grounded in the love of the Triune God. However, I see that starting with the threeness of God, based on the noted need for a relationship to exist to actualize love, rather than starting as Charry did with God’s oneness as the basis for that love, has greater preeminence. I also find her delineation of creator, redeemer, and sanctifier that she describes as part of God’s divine triplicity, to be articulated almost more of as an afterthought of God, rather than that what I understand as the immanent/economic sameness of the Trinitarian self-giving persons, present since the very beginning. I am grateful for Charry’s insights and for the work

35. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 377.

36. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 379.

37. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 379.

38. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 379.

that has been done since her writing addressing the significance of formation and growth that takes place when we approach theology in way that can bring flourishing life.

Thomas Torrance

Thomas Torrance is considered one of the most prominent British theologians of the second half of the twentieth century. He published over 600 works over the course of 60 years and his work has been quite impactful. Although his language and concepts are quite academic in nature, when pondered deeply, they have great application in everyday life as a Christian. His writings engage his understanding of “the nature of theological knowledge and its relation to non-theological conceptions of science along with studies including a range of doctrinal themes.”³⁹ Torrance was a student of Karl Barth and spent much of his focus and energies articulating those understandings he received from Barth. One can read in Torrance’s theology the impact Barth placed on preeminence of the Trinity. Torrance wrote in many of his works that the Trinity was the ground and grammar of all theology. “Torrance seems to be a theologian who actually knows the Trinity itself and writes out of his life with God- the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰

Torrance believed

that all human knowledge of God be governed by who God is in himself in his internal relations, that is by the immanent or ontological Trinity.... Torrance believed that if we do not know God in his internal relations then we cannot know what God has done for us in the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ and what he is doing now in his Spirit as the ascended and advent Lord.⁴¹

39. John Webster. “Foreword,” in Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation: An Entry into the Theology of T. F. Torrance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xi.

40. Thomas F. Weinandy, “Book Reviews: *The Christian Doctrine of God*,” *Expository Times* 107, no. 11 (1996), 345, quoted in Paul D. Molnar, “Introduction,” in Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, ix-x.

41. Paul D. Molnar, “Introduction,” x.

For Torrance, and I agree, the whole of the Christian doctrine of God is the final self-revelation of Jesus Christ which ultimately is an expression of God's Triune nature. In Christ we see God for who he really is, for Christ is the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15):

That is why we believe that what God is toward us in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, he is in himself, antecedently and eternally in himself; and that what he imparts to us through the Spirit who shed the love of God into our hearts, he is in himself, antecedently and eternally in himself. It is thus through Jesus Christ God has given himself to us and through the Holy Spirit takes us up into communion with himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God of all grace whom we know as the God of our salvation.⁴²

For Torrance, and I believe for each of us, this has immense impact on our understanding of God. God is not some isolated unknowable deity, but a God who is "free to go outside of himself" and share in our lives and invite us to share in his. To know that God condescends to us in this way in order that we might know him and be known by him, a God who is inexhaustible in his nature and who surpasses any or all of our thoughts about him, a God who when known this way, brings us to our knees in praise and worship to the praise of his glory, (Ephesians 1:3-14).⁴³ This also means, as Torrance states, "that God is not some immutable, impassible deity... who cannot be touched with our human feelings, pains and hurts," but rather who freely comes alongside us to live and die as one and to reconcile us to himself because of his love and his desire to be with us and for us in all things.⁴⁴

Because of the breadth of his work spread over such a long-time span, it has been a challenge for many, most especially me, to engage with some of Torrance's foundational concepts and the impact of his Trinitarian theology. "Torrance's trinitarian theology is a force that must be reckoned with by those who seek to do Trinitarian theology in the century that

42. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 3.

43. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1-4.

44. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 4.

follows Karl Barth.”⁴⁵ In attempting to narrow my scope of this thesis-project I began and ended with Torrance’s book *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*. But I also discovered that there was much more written in Torrance’s other works that could be relevant and helpful for this thesis-project. I came across a relatively new book entitled *Trinitarian Grace and Participation: An Entry into the Theology of T. F. Torrance*, written by Geordie W. Ziegler. Ziegler is a Presbyterian pastor in the trenches of everyday life and who, by appreciating the gift that Torrance’s Trinitarian theology could be to the church, completed his PhD integrating the theme of divine grace (which was Torrance’s initial work and PhD under Barth) throughout the entirety of Torrance’s writings. This book is the work of his PhD project. From the very beginning of Torrance’s studies, it was God’s divine grace that permeated all of his theology. In Torrance’s own words, “It was the concept of grace together with the internal structure of the Trinity and Christology which I felt would give me the grasp of theology in its inner scientific relations.”⁴⁶

Grace for Torrance is nothing less than the self-giving of God for our salvation. This self-giving of God is an activity of the whole Trinity which moves from the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and in the Spirit through the Son to the Father. The ultimate purpose of this motion of Grace is fellowship with human creatures and the redemption of the whole created order.⁴⁷

It is this concept of grace as being intrinsic to God’s very Triune being that Torrance was promoting, rather than an oft misconstrued grace seen as a commodity or a created something “unwittingly co-opted for humanistic and pietistic purposes,” often an instrument as a means to

45. Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*, xxxiv.

46. John I. Hesselink, “A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ—An Interview with Thomas F. Torrance,” *Reformed Review* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 53, quoted in Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*, loc. 113, Kindle.

47. Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*, xvi.

an end.⁴⁸ Torrance believed and I agree that “We must give an intelligent life-answer to grace in such a way that our existence is ours only as we re-live our grace-existence in a thankful and knowledgeable motion in answer to the Word of grace.”⁴⁹ Ziegler goes on to say that in his life as a pastor, he laments that so much of discipleship and formation in people’s life with God is reduced to moral effort exercises to try and attempt to be the people God created us to be. Rather, he argues that Torrance helps us to see that grounding ourselves in the Trinitarian objective reality of our life in Christ, brings us to a place of understanding our formation as a participation in a “life-relation.”⁵⁰ We have “received adoption as sons and because we are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, “Abba! Father!” So, you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (Galatians 4:5b-7). The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ has graced and granted us to be included in Jesus’ relation with the Father. This is how we are formed and transformed “into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Ziegler creates the phrase *objective Trinitarian participation* to describe this. It is objective because the one doing the work is the ascended Christ; it is Trinitarian because this formation has its origin and perpetuation through the Holy Spirit sent by the Father with the Son. And it is participation “because the fundamental mode of our life is one of inclusion.”⁵¹ This objective Trinitarian participation stands in contrast to what Ziegler names *subjective moral formation*. It is subjective because the primary agent is ourself,

48. Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*, xxvii.

49. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 116, quoted in Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*, 241.

50. Geordie W. Ziegler, *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*, 241-242.

51. Geordie W. Ziegler, “Is it Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation? Recovering Ontology,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 2, no.1 (May 2018): 75-76, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1939790918758164?journalCode=jsfa>

rather than the ascended Christ; it is moral because it is a means to an end to attain virtue and ideal behavior; and it is formation because it assumes that we can train ourselves to imitate Jesus. This can result in a focus on nonpersonal ideals and in the end have an impersonalizing effect on one's relationship with God. To be truly human is to have "a relation of dependence and trust with the living God."⁵² Torrance was very concerned about how action and deed in the Christian life was understood. Apparently, he had experienced in his own Church of Scotland, the tendency for moralism and therapeutic psychology to supplant a life grounded in the living Jesus Christ.⁵³ There is much that could be unpacked in understanding what it means to live *in* Christ and how that impacts our formation, and again beyond the scope of this project.⁵⁴ However, I do believe that the shift in one's engagement with God as the one who desires to invite participation can be life changing. The contrast between the two approaches that Ziegler noted, objective Trinitarian participation and subjective moral formation, could not be more influential. "The one invites participation- we respond in Christ's response. The other invites self-assertion by calling for an independent response- we respond to Christ's response."⁵⁵ One is grounded ontologically "in the risen humanity in Christ" to relate to the present living God, while the other is based "in the self as its own ground" and draws the believer to relate to virtuous ideals and modified behavior.⁵⁶ It is this invitational and participatory approach that I believe the early church fathers understood as *theosis*, and into which Donald Fairbairn speaks.

52. Geordie W. Ziegler, "Is it Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation?," 77-78.

53. Geordie W. Ziegler, "Is it Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation?," 80.

54. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From 'Blessed Christ' to 'Being in Christ'," in "*In Christ*" in *Paul*, ed. Michael J. Thate, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Constantine R. Campbell (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 3-30.

55. Geordie W. Ziegler, "Is it Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation?," 79.

56. Geordie W. Ziegler, "Is it Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation?," 79.

Donald Fairbairn

It was Donald Fairbairn's book, *Life in the Trinity*, that first opened my eyes to the comprehensive and historical theology behind the words of Peterson and Charry and helped me immensely in my attempts at reading and integrating Torrance. Fairbairn's book was written as a textbook in Christian theology, possibly as a standalone book, but also written with the thought of coming alongside comprehensive systematic theology books to broaden their perspective, making their theology more "systemic" than "systematic" (as I spoke of in the introduction). Fairbairn believes that theology books and paradigms are often organized around certain themes, or scarlet threads as he calls them. For evangelical theologians, this is often the classic three distinctives of Reformation theology which is: Scripture alone, Christ alone, and faith alone. Affirming these, as Fairbairn is an evangelical, he goes on to make the point that perhaps we should broaden our understanding of our theological doctrines to arrive more at the heart of Christianity. He believes, as I have grown to believe, that the overall theme or scarlet thread of all of our Christian life is that of sharing in the Son's relationship to the Father, that invitation to participate in the life of the Trinity. I believe that is what it means to be *in Christ*. This is what the early church fathers believed and wrote about as they pondered what God was up to in the Incarnation. They believed that at the heart of God's story, God in his divine grace and initiative, chose to come to us is for the purpose to forgive us and justify us, yes; but in order to grant us the gift of then participating in the relationship between the Father and the Son.⁵⁷ The gap that we often experience in modern life between what we believe and how we live is a result of divorcing our theology from our life with God. It is as I have articulated throughout this project, the difference of "knowing about vs. knowing God." The early church fathers were able to

57. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009), ix-xv.

articulate life with God that was more livable because they were talking to people who had never heard of any of this before and were attempting to connect the significance of God coming to us in the flesh. Fairbairn here cites Athanasius:

If someone wishes to see God, who is invisible by nature and in no way visible, he understands and knows him from his works, so he who does not see Christ with his mind, let him learn of him from the works of his body.... Let him...wonder that through such simple means these divine things have been revealed to us, and that through death immortality has come to all, and through the incarnation of the Word the universal providence and its leader and creator the Word of God himself have been made known. For he became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption.⁵⁸

For the church fathers, everything they believed was connected to the life of God; they did not come up with individual doctrines about salvation, justification, sanctification, etc. “Doctrine, as they understood it, pointed beyond itself to God, in whose divine life human beings are called to share.”⁵⁹ The word used to communicate this sharing of divine life is the Greek word *theosis*, which I spoke of in chapter 2 when discussing the invitational nature of the Triune God, especially focusing on 2 Peter 1:3-4. *Theos* means God, so the word *theosis* means “becoming like God,” or as Fairbairn notes using the Latin rendering, *deificatio*, or deification in English. The problem that this teaching can potentially bring is a misunderstanding is that we become divine like God is divine. That is not what the church fathers meant.⁶⁰ This misunderstanding of *theosis* has limited its impact on theology for some time and in my opinion, perhaps is part of the underlying issue that this thesis-project addresses; the lack of thinking of first of the Triunity when one thinks about God. Fairbairn explains in a journal article that the

58. Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 269, quoted in Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 6.

59. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 7.

60. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 7-9.

Eastern patristic understanding of salvation had been summarized by a “two-trajectory” approach developed by Adolf Harnack written in his *History of Dogma* (1885-1889).⁶¹ Harnack dismissed the Eastern patristics as being more interested in a mystical deification and overcoming human mortality and corruption, while he believed the Western fathers, Tertullian and Augustine, were more biblical as they focused more on the atoning work of the cross resulting in one’s justification. Fairbairn goes on to explain that he believes there is a “three-trajectory” approach to understanding our salvation. There is the Western judicial approach which Harnack upheld. There is the more mystical Eastern approach which focuses mostly on the understanding that participation in what later Eastern theology calls the energies of God and often results in a blurring of lines between creature and creator. And then there is the third trajectory that understands salvation to be participation and deification in a more personal way, emphasizing “our sharing in the personal communion between the persons of the Trinity.”⁶² This participation or sharing in the communion was understood to be adopted as God’s sons and daughters and “thus sharing by grace in the fellowship the Son has with the Father by nature.”⁶³ Fairbairn admittedly oversimplifies his point by naming these three trajectories; the juridical, the mystical, and the personal. He cites Irenaeus of Lyons as the church father who wrote very early on (130-200) and most expressively about “our adoption understood in the sense of personal communion with God.”⁶⁴ In the words of Irenaeus,

Being ignorant of him who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are deprived of his gift, which is eternal life; and not receiving the incorruptible Word, they remain in mortal flesh.... He undoubtedly speaks these words to those who have not received the gift of

61. Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Soteriology: Three Trajectories,” *JETS* 50, no.2 (June 2007): 289-310, accessed March 19, 2022, https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/50/50-2/JETS_50-2_289-310_Fairbairn.pdf

62. Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Soteriology,” 293.

63. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 9.

64. Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Soteriology,” 295.

adoption but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God...The Word of God was made man, and he who was the Son of God became the Son of Man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality.⁶⁵

What Irenaeus is saying is that those who reject this invitation of adoption shared through the Son, deny their own salvation. Salvation is seen then, as more than being saved from our sins. It is being brought into God's family as one of his own:

We do not simply receive something that he gives us, because the Son gives us his very self. And the essence of this gift of himself is that we become the sons and daughters of God. We are adopted into the same relationship he has with God the Father-into his own sonship with the Father. Incorruption and immortality (as well as other benefits of salvation) flow from the gift of God the Son himself; they are not the primary aspects of *theosis*.⁶⁶

My belief, like that of Fairbairn, is that understanding our life with God in this way is biblical, engaging and formative. Shortly before Jesus is arrested and journeys to the cross, the prayer Jesus prays with and for his disciples, and for those yet to come, that is you and me, is a prayer that speaks to this incredible gift of communion that will be shared once his work on the cross is done:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:20-26)

65. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.1, quoted in Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 33.

66. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity*, 34.

Salvation is so much more than the benefits it brings. Are we, as God's people more desiring of those gifts than the Giver himself, the Triune God?

Julie Canlis

Throughout this doctorate journey, I found it difficult to articulate and narrow down exactly what I wanted to study and ultimately test in my hypothesis. There is so much written, especially now, about Trinitarian theology. I believe that when I discovered the word “participation,” in relation to the Trinity, is when my mind began stirring.⁶⁷ Although Peterson had planted that word in my mind years prior, I had not really made the connection in a more academically reasoned way. I took a course several years ago (2014) at Regent College in Vancouver and had a conversation with James Houston about my idea of theology needing to be more systemic than systematic. He introduced me to the writings of Julie Canlis who had co-taught several classes with him at Regent. I listened to several of Canlis's lectures from Regent and found her to be understandable, applicable, and enlarging. Julie won the Templeton award for Theological Promise in 2007 for her work on John Calvin and earned her doctorate from the University of St. Andrews under Dr. Alan Torrance. She published *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* in 2010 which received a 2011 award of merit from Christianity Today. Canlis's passion was to answer the question of how to be spiritually formed by what we believe. Her evangelical upbringing with the emphasis on God's amazing grace, left her confused and caught between what she describes in her life with God as “an unhealthy

67. I remember being at Trinity College in Bristol in the dark library during our pastoral theology tract there and discovering a bright red book on the shelf entitled *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* by Paul S. Fiddes (2000). Although this helped light the flame, I did not use the book that much in my research.

activism or a self-repudiating passivity.”⁶⁸ Her desire in writing her book was to help Christians really understand what it means to participate in the Triune life, which for Canlis means to be *in Christ*. After extensive reading she found herself drawn to Christian writers and thinkers from the past who tackled some of the same questions she had; on how to be formed by what you believe if our life is indeed hidden in Christ. All of these writers addressed these questions within the realm of the Trinity. Her resulting study on Calvin and Irenaeus (her book) was looking at their theology of participation in the life of God in Christ and answering the question of how we allow ourselves to be pulled into “his love, his dynamic, his mission, his communion” of Father Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶⁹ I actually reached out to Julie Canlis by e-mail asking for any guidance on narrowing down a thesis on participation in the divine life. Her encouraging e-mail response was this:

The hardest thing about forming a thesis on “participation” is that it is like forming a thesis on “life.” I found this so difficult myself when forming my thesis! I had to go so broad to try and catch it all, that it threatened to sink me! I’m wondering if camping around:

- Barth (who did a lot on participation) and perhaps his influence on Eugene?
- J. B. Torrance and/or Thomas Torrance
- talking about the eucharist as a form of participation in Christ⁷⁰

This helped set my course on developing my thesis. Her book and multiple journal articles and lectures have been an engaging help as well.

In *Calvin’s Ladder*, Canlis’s desire is to speak to her belief that participation in Christ, in the divine life of God, was not just a patristic thought of long ago whose varied interpretations in current academia seem often to be a point of disagreement. Rather Canlis found that this idea of

68. “Wife, Mother, Parish Professional, and CT Award Winner: An Interview with Julie Canlis,” Eerdword: The Eerdmans Blog, March 15, 2011, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://eerdword.com/wife-mother-parish-professional-and-ct-award-winner-an-interview-with-julie-canlis/>.

69. Julie Canlis, “An Interview with Julie Canlis.”

70. Julie Canlis, e-mail message to author, July 27, 2018.

participation was present in the theology of the Protestant Reformation scholar John Calvin.⁷¹ In one of her lectures that I listened to, Canlis spoke of the encouragement of James Houston to study Calvin, despite her disinterest and trepidation in engaging Calvin. What she discovered was rich insight into the theology of participation in Calvin's writings. What this might possibly accomplish going forward is a not only a renewed interest in Trinitarian theology in Calvin, but a revitalization of our Reformed Evangelical understanding of salvation as more than simply a pure and pious doctrine of justification and sanctification.

According to Canlis, Calvin enters into this participation through "the concept of Trinitarian *koinonia*. The Greek word *koinonia* (used by St. Paul to mean human participation in God's life) suggests an entirely distinctive way of conceiving the relationship between God and humanity."⁷² Canlis places Calvin in the mystical tradition which is certainly not where my interactions with his writings would have landed me. She does this noting that Calvin was an heir of medieval theological tradition, as well as Calvin's enthusiasm about one's affections of the heart. For Calvin ascent of the soul was not some mystical Platonic experience, nor something that Jesus did to get us into heaven. Rather Canlis makes the point that for Calvin, ascent was the ultimate action of Jesus Christ, "into which we are included and, as such, is the foundation of his doctrine of participation. Ascent not only represents the moment when the *human* Jesus was taken up to his Father but also when all of humanity is opened to this relationship as well."⁷³ For Canlis, in Calvin's creative way, he was able to integrate the two movements of God's descent

71. Julie Canlis' book is extremely dense and detailed as she covers a breadth of theology in both Calvin and Irenaeus. The introduction of the book is incredibly well-written, condensed, and accessible, so that is where I have cited most of her main ideas and quotations going forward.

72. Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 2.

73. Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 2.

and ascent into the one ongoing narrative story of God. God has chosen to come to us and stand in for us in Jesus Christ (descent). And yet as a human being, he leads us back to the Father (ascent). For Calvin and Canlis, “the entire Christian life is an outworking of this ascent-the appropriate response to God’s descent to us-that had already taken place in Christ.”⁷⁴ Jesus Christ in his humanity has responded perfectly in his response and ascension to God. This emboldens us to respond in Christ’s response. “Ascent, then, is neither a matter of the soul’s latent powers nor of conscientious Christian endeavor but of communion: it is a participation in Christ’s own response to the Father, whether that be desire for God, prayer, obedience, vocation, or worship.”⁷⁵ As Calvin himself puts it: “Christ gathers believers into participation in the Father.... And certainly for this reason Christ descended to us, to bear us up to the Father, and at the same time to bear us up to himself inasmuch as he is one with the Father.”⁷⁶ This understanding of participation aligns with Fairbairn’s articulation of our life with God as that of Jesus’s relationship to the Father, reflecting what our life with God is to look like. I believe it is similar dynamics, yet said in another context, and am grateful for Canlis’ incorporation of a Reformation giant to speak into this understanding and conversation. In addition, just as Fairbairn cites the very early church fathers as articulating so well our life with God, so too Canlis parallels the theology of Irenaeus’ theology of ascent with Calvin’s. “Despite their differences, christology for Irenaeus and Calvin serves this theological anthropology of koinonia: the human vocation of union with the triune God.”⁷⁷ For both Irenaeus and Calvin, Jesus Christ was the “ladder” of one’s ascent into the Triune life.

⁷⁴ Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 3.

⁷⁵ Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 3.

⁷⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Lewis Battles, (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2006), 155.

In our correspondence, Julie sent me a draft journal article that she was working on at the time entitled “The Geography of Participation: *In Christ* Is Location, Location, Location.”⁷⁸ In this article she speaks to the potential for this idea of participation in the divine life of God to go sideways in a sense; to become simply an ethereal conversation among theologians with no impact on people’s lives. What does participation in Christ really mean to the average person in the pew? How does one make this practical and livable in our bodies? She writes, “I want to explore the theology behind the assertion that participation in Christ still involves matter-it is not a spiritual realization, or interior experience, or mystical aeon but must involve real places that are concrete, practical, and geographical.”⁷⁹ Canlis herself, is a busy mother of four children. She acknowledges that her life in Christ needs to be just as real in the library as it is while changing diapers. She suggests several concrete ways the church can help people experience that participation in the divine life, that is to remain in Christ, to “abide in me and I in you,” in their physical bodies (John 15:4a). These concrete ways will be encouraged at my thesis-retreat project and discussed in the following chapter. I anticipate reading more from this engaging scholar in the days to come.

Conclusion

The subtitle to this chapter three is “what difference does it make?” What difference does approaching and engaging with God in his Triune nature make or does it make any? This really is the underlying question of this thesis-project. I have looked at several different theologians

77. Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 174.

78. Julie Canlis, “The Geography of Participation: *In Christ* Is Location, Location, Location,” *Ex Auditu* 33 (2017): 130-146.

79. Julie Canlis, “The Geography of Participation,” 132.

who speak in different ways as to the significance of knowing God first and foremost in his Triunity. As a human being we are created body, mind, heart, and soul for communion. This invitation that God gives to us in Christ, to be participants in his divine life is the answer to that longing. This grounds our foundational need as a human being for identity, for purpose, and for relationship. As Augustine so poignantly penned, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”⁸⁰ We have been made to love the one who made us, who loves us, and whose very being is the embodiment of that love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

80. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1.1.1.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROJECT:
REDISCOVERING THE TRINITY

Introduction

As easily discerned from the opening paragraphs of this thesis-project in chapter one, my initial experience as a budding seminarian in the country of the Trinity was from my bent as a scientist, i.e., a registered nurse, engaging the doctrine of the Trinity in a rather scientific, pedantic, and systematic approach. This of course impacted how I perceived, experienced, and communicated Trinitarian theology which in retrospect, I now believe lacked significant depth and application. Ellen Charry argues that “under the influence of modern notions of truth, theology became more interested in the coherence of Christian doctrines than in the ability of those doctrines to sponsor a godly life.”¹ Donald Fairbairn makes a helpful point as to why the rift between theology and our life with God often happens. He notes the difference between *doctrine* which comes from the Latin word for “teaching” in relation to the Christian life as a whole and *doctrines*, which are individual teachings and concepts about specific true ideas about God. “I am convinced that part of the reason we tend to regard theology, doctrine, as being somewhat irrelevant to Christian life is that our theological discussions focus on the doctrine rather than on the God to whom those doctrines point.”² So to apply this to Trinitarian theology would be to say we believe that God is Triune (one of many doctrines) rather than we believe in the Triune God. This can potentially seem like an insignificant point, but the more I pondered

1. Ellen T. Charry, “Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Theology Today* 54, no. 3 (October 1997): 367.

2. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 4-5.

this reality, the clearer the point of my thesis-project became. In addition, this point helped me in the design of the way that I would test my hypothesis. I desired to find multiple ways to communicate the idea that this invitation into the life of the Triune God can potentially be transformative and life-giving.

My “former self” would potentially have planned a Sunday school class or small group curriculum with extensive teaching and note-taking, making certain my attendees could walk away from their instruction noting things like the difference between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, having the knowledge of the Arian-Athanasian controversy, and being able to speak of the difference between the economic and immanent Trinity. James K. Smith speaks of this kind of discipleship as “bobble head Christianity, so fixated on the cognitive that it assumes a picture of human beings that look like bobble heads: mammoth heads that dwarf an almost nonexistent body. In sum because the church buys into a cognitivist anthropology, it adopts a stunted pedagogy that is fixated on the mind.”³ Perhaps my own personal transformation has invited me into a more diverse way of gaining knowledge and understanding. It has led me to an appreciation of non-verbal and more relational ways of pedagogy and the on-going resulting transformation. Reading a variety of doctoral dissertations applying Trinitarian theology to life, I discovered an array of vast and diverse approaches of testing these various hypotheses.⁴ I specifically looked at the teaching tools, as well as the evaluative tools, in several thesis-projects. These included the topics of preaching on the Trinity, of comprehensive congregational teaching over time, of the engagement in an extensive psychological survey measuring the God-image

3. James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 42-43.

4. There are many references in my bibliography of these various dissertations whose ideas and analyses that I read and fully appreciated but did not directly utilize or employ in my thesis-project.

scale in persons, and of the creative use of various original diagrams and video presentations.⁵ After reading and reflecting on these different designs, I decided to approach my project to test my hypothesis in a weekend retreat style model. One reason for this is that a weekend retreat setting would allow for a variety of pedagogical methods to communicate what I was trying to impart. My desire was for more than just cognitive discipleship. I wanted to impact more than people's knowledge about God. My desire was to impact people's love of and for God. As significant as the history, development, and implications of Trinitarian theology are, J. I. Packer reminds us that "a little knowledge *of* God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge *about* Him."⁶ "Transformational knowing of God comes from meeting God in our depths, not in the abstraction of dusty theological propositions."⁷ I felt that a weekend retreat model would not only grant a diversity in pedagogies, but also invite formation in community and experience.

Kevin Vanhoozer wrote an article entitled "Theological Core Exercises," in response to walking alongside his elderly mother's experience of dementia.⁸ What Vanhoozer surmised in watching his mother's declining cognitive health, was that despite her lack of memory of friends, family, and the world around her, her identity in who she was never wavered. The reason for that, Vanhoozer notes, was that implanted deep within her inner being was her identity as a

5. These included XX: Jimmy, R. Caron, "The Doctrine of the Trinity: A Paradigm for Preaching Doctrine in the 21st Century" (D.Min. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, 1999); Randall S. Benson, "Sowing the Trinity Small Church Redevelopment with a Trinitarian Mind" (D.Min. thesis, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, February 2005); Fred Wayne Poston, "Implementing the Doctrine of the Trinity to Enhance the Divine Life in the Local Church" (D.Min. thesis, The King's Seminary, 2008); and Steven P. Thomason, "Deep in the Burbs: a Participatory Action Research Project Exploring How the Social Trinity Impacts Spiritual Formation in Suburban ELCA" (D.Phil. diss., Luther Seminary, 2015).

6. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniv. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), quoted in David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 35.

7. David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, 43.

8. Kevin Vanhoozer, "Theological Core Exercises," *Christianity Today* 62, no. 9 (November 2018): 46-48.

beloved child of God that she had nurtured in every way her whole life long. Vanhoozer's point was to challenge Christians to regular practices or "exercises" that are basic to being a creature made in God's image. He likens the popular core strength training in exercise, to theological core exercises that "concern what we do to participate in what Father, Son, and Spirit are doing in, with, and through us to make us more like Christ.... Theological core training focuses on three analogous aspects of our spiritual core-the cognitive, volitional, and relational-each a response to a prior word of God."⁹ This is where I began in the planning of the retreat. I included cognitive aspects in three teaching and conversation sessions, volitional aspects in requested pre-and post-survey questionnaires, weekly responsive journaling with question prompts, as well as attendance at planned worship experiences, and relational aspects in group meals, walks, film, and artistic engagements. All of these segments will be detailed in this chapter. My underlying desire was that the retreat attendees would experience a transformational knowing of the Triunity of God and would walk away from the weekend with the understanding that their bodies, minds, hearts, and souls are invited into the divine life of this Triune God.

Retreat Attendees

As referenced earlier, I wanted to limit and define a very specific group of people to target and unpack my ideas around the potentially transformational thoughts on the Triunity of God. Starting small was important because it made things more manageable as well as evaluable. Most every Christian would in some way affirm their belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, however I was looking for committed life-long Christians to engage even deeper with the Triunity of God in their life and be willing to openly share their thoughts and insights. I decided

9. Kevin Vanhoozer, "Theological Core Exercises," 47.

to focus on mature evangelical Christian women. The reason for choosing only women was purely practical, simply as a matter of the fact that this was a retreat/sleepover, thus making the arrangements easier. I originally was going to ask seven women, and then I had another person learn I was putting this retreat together, and she asked to participate as well. So, I asked eight women from my evangelical congregation. Their background surveys relayed that their ages spanned from 55-71, with the average age of 61. They have all been a professing Christian for more than 25 years, and seven of them being a Christian for over 44 years. All but one of the women has been a member at Westminster Church for over 25 years, with the other one only five years, as she had moved away from Charlotte. All of these women outwardly reflected a mature life in Christ. This maturity was reflected in leadership roles on church committees, as well as in church officer positions of both elder and deacon, in teaching positions in Sunday school, as well as with parachurch groups such as Bible Study Fellowship and Community Bible Study, and in volunteer service in organizations such as Young Life, IAM 24/7, and Changed Choices.¹⁰ Not only was their maturity exhibited outwardly, but because of my history of long-standing relationships with these women in my congregation, I knew that their inner life embodied maturity, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) with wisdom and prayerfulness. Two of the women had taken one class each at a seminary.¹¹ All of the women voiced belief in the Trinity. I made a point to invite each woman over an in-person conversation to openly

10. Bible Study Fellowship and Community Bible Study are international Christian interdenominational parachurch fellowships of lay people offering a system of structured bible study. Young Life is a Christian ministry that reaches out to middle school, high school, and college students in all 50 of the United States and in more than 100 countries around the world. I AM 24/7 is a local Christian ministry in Charlotte, NC that reaches out to young boys providing instruction in sports, school tutoring, and Bible study. Changed Choices is a local Christian ministry in Charlotte, NC that comes alongside women who have experienced incarceration and helps them lead restored lives.

11. One had taken Old Testament Bible Journey at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte. The other had taken a two-week class at Regent seminary in Vancouver, Canada (topic unknown).

communicate my desire for their participation, as well as sincerely acknowledging their freedom to decline participation. All eight of the women agreed in conversation. When polled on the background information sheet as to why they agreed to participate in this retreat weekend, their response was mostly to support what I was doing, (not a particularly sound reason), but also to deepen their relationship with God. I sent out an e-mail on November 8, 2019, confirming the invitation as well as a Doodle calendar link to attempt to designate available times to gather.¹² Attempting to pick a weekend, a suitable place, a schedule, and appropriate meals for nine (eight plus myself) women was a project in and of itself! All eight participants signed the necessary Informed Consent document which was sent out on December 12 by e-mail and either returned to me by scan or a paper copy that they brought with them to the retreat.¹³

Retreat Format and Timeframe

Once we had an agreement with dates, we set the retreat date for January 10-12, 2020, in Montreat, North Carolina with a house available, and prayers for acceptable weather. Unfortunately, between the time the date was set, and the retreat actually took place, one woman had a tragic accident breaking her tibia and fibula with trauma surgery to insert two plates and ten screws and not able to bear weight for ten weeks. However, we did some adjustments with our scheduling of our times together and with a lot of maneuvering of walker and crutches and hands-of-help from the others, we were able to accommodate her, and her presence was cherished. A letter of welcome, a rough schedule of the retreat, a background information form, and a pre-retreat reflection journal entry primer, were sent out to the attendees on January 9 by e-

12. See Appendix A.

13. See Appendix D.

mail.¹⁴ I was intentional in my timing of this as I wanted to be certain to receive genuine and authentic responses from this group, and I did not want to give them an inordinate amount of time to ponder, discuss, or read about the various topics and experiences we were to share prior to our time together.

Day 1, Friday January 10, 2020

I drove up to Montreat earlier in the week to prepare myself, the teaching materials, and the house. As the day to begin drew near, I must say I became quite apprehensive with what felt like an overwhelming responsibility to be engaging others in such a significant and weighty topic. As *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, “He may well be loved, but not thought. By love can he be caught and held, but by thinking never.”¹⁵ This brought me to my knees, which indeed is really the only place to start. The attendees arrived between 4-6 on Friday evening. Some drove alone and others together, and all but one drove from Charlotte (having moved to Asheville and had a brief drive over to Montreat). Once everyone was settled in their rooms, we met together in the common living area for wine and cheese. All of these women knew each other by name, yet some had more established relationships than others. I desired to establish a communal feel for the weekend as much as possible so that people could feel free to open up and share with the group. We moved from this time of fellowship to the dinner table.

I incorporated several times of table fellowship during the weekend. Scripture teaches us of God’s presence in hospitality and meals. The table designates a special relationship between those who sit at the same table; it is a symbol of community in fellowship. It is remarkable how

14. See Appendix A.

15. Justin McCann, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and other treatises* (London: The Orchard Books, 1952), quoted in Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 17.

much of Jesus's life is told in settings defined by meals at a table; tables where he is either the guest or the host. As Henri Nouwen points out, "The table is one of the most intimate places in our lives. It is there that we give ourselves to one another. Please pass the potatoes, or can I have another glass? Would you please pass the salt?"¹⁶ We express our needs and our desires openly and authentically at the table. It is for that reason that I incorporated numerous times of communal meals and fellowship over the weekend.

During our welcome hour, I also incorporated a game to choose undisclosed letters of the alphabet for each person to use as their "identity code" for the rest of the weekend and ongoing reflections. They entered these letters on their pre-retreat forms (background information and initial Tozer reflection) that had been e-mailed to them a day prior. I also had them fill out an initial survey of evaluative questions during the welcome hour.¹⁷ As will be discussed in chapter five, I had a difficult time developing these questions and in retrospect felt that they were not ideally worded. The survey contained twelve questions that the attendees were to answer based on a likert scale of 1 through 5, as follows: #1 = Strongly Disagree; #2 = Disagree, #3 = Neutral, #4 = Agree, #5 = Strongly Agree. This same survey was given again at the end of the weekend, and then once more after 40 days of weekly journaling.¹⁸ Over the forty days after the retreat, the attendees were sent six weekly reflection prompts to reflect and write upon in their journals.¹⁹ In addition to taking the survey at the end of the 40 days, they engaged once more with the A. W. Tozer reflection, as well as answer a straight-forward question about any change in their

16. Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 55.

17. See Appendix A.

18. See Appendix A and Appendix C.

19. See Appendix C.

engagement with God over the course of this time period.²⁰ What follows will be both the content and the reasoning behind the activities of the retreat weekend.

Teaching 1

We transitioned from the table to a teaching time, gathered in a room with comfortable chairs around a fireplace. Each woman was given a journal that had Rublev's icon on the front pointing to the theme of our time together (there was to be more unpacking of this icon on Saturday).²¹ The journal was for both note-taking during the weekend as well as a place to capture the six weekly reflections following the retreat. I plan to return these journals to my attendees upon completion of this thesis-project with the hope that they will be a reminder of the seeds planted. As well, I gave each attendee a copy of Fairbairn's book, *Life in the Trinity*. My thought on this was that the accessibility of this book in explaining these complex topics that I was to introduce would be helpful for clarity and reflection in the days and months to come. I opened our welcome time reiterating a few important thoughts. First was my gratitude for the giving of the attendees' time and energies to attend this retreat. Second was briefly sharing my own transformational journey engaging with the Triunity of God and my desire to share this with others. Third, was my utmost respect for their responses to my hypothesis, a respect which comes with abundant freedom to disagree, disengage, or challenge. I again reminded them of the confidentiality of the journaling process and my hope for honest and authentic responses. I purposefully did not hand out notes or outlines as I wanted to engage and teach personally, but did regularly repeat the theme of the retreat to address three basic questions; "Who is this God?"

20. See Appendix C.

21. See Appendix B.

“What is this God like?” and “What difference does this make?” In the attachments discussed below are the three basic outlines of what I covered in each teaching time. I opened our time in prayer using Ephesians 3:14-21, a prayer to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge as we understand and experience it in our own human limitations:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Our time then transitioned with an open discussion of Tozer’s idea of what we think about when we think about God is the most important thing about us. As noted in chapter three, one’s understanding about the nature of God will profoundly influence everything else she believes about the Christian faith and life in general, as well as one’s understanding of themselves. I worked hard to impart that the weekend was not going to be like a seminary class, but my belief that theology should always bring life. It needs to be clear, purposeful, and applicable. It needs to be life-giving! This first night was meant to be introductory, giving the women space and time to discuss how they currently engage with God. Our teaching time together was conversational in nature, guided by my outline notes that parallel my writings of this thesis-project.²² We focused on the question of who is this God that we believe in, and how has he chosen to reveal himself to us. Emphasizing that the word “Trinity” is not found in Scripture yet acknowledging that the Bible is where we always begin, we discussed various Bible passages that speak to who God is. I gave some brief background both in the development

22. See Appendix B.

and the demise of Trinitarian theology. We discussed the history and writing of the Nicene Creed, and we recited it together at the close of the teaching time. I encouraged them to think this night about how they approach and engage with God; is it more as one in three or three in one? I closed the evening with an abbreviation of St. Patrick's breastplate prayer.²³

Day 2, Saturday, January 11, 2020

We began the next morning with breakfast together, again encouraging table talk and fellowship. We gathered in the common living room around the fireplace, and I asked one of the women to open us in prayer.

Teaching 2

After opening in prayer, I polled the group to make sure that they were hopefully following my train of thought, reviewing our prior conversations ascertaining the Triunity of God. Who is this God we believe in? He is the Triune God. Again, I generally followed my outline emphasizing its main points, starting with the Triune God as the eternal exchange of love.²⁴ It is from that place that God's overarching picture of redemption takes shape. Out of God's being of totally fulfilled love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God freely created the world and the humanity that inhabits it. This speaks to God's desire to invite us to share in that love. That is what the Triune God is like. His nature is that of a loving, relational, and a personal God. It was in his divine initiative of coming to us in the Incarnation that he chose to adopt us as his beloved children (Galatians 4:4-6). We discussed this for quite some time, as it is a

23. See Appendix B.

24. See Appendix B.

comprehensive mystery that impacts all of what we understand about God in the big story of redemption. I then moved on to discuss the equality of Father, Son, and Spirit within the Trinity in terms of being and relationship; really speaking to God's oneness. There was a lot of questions concerning whether one person of the Trinity (the Father) has a more significant role.²⁵ There is perfect equality in being and in relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The love that they share is a love that is self-giving, other-affirming, and community-forming.²⁶ This is what the beautiful Triune God is like. And being made in his image, this is the kind of love we are to embody as well. We had great conversation unpacking this reality. I shared a personal story of a ruptured relationship that was healed through pondering this reality of what God's love is like. Loving your neighbor or your spouse or your child or your boss in a way that is self-giving, other-affirming, and community-forming is life changing. It was in the richness of our conversations that we acknowledged that this mysterious Triune God is indeed loving, relational, personal, merciful, beautiful, and invitational.

Artistic Response

I often remind people of the reality that God is an artist, not a theologian; as an artist God creates. I thus included a time for some exercises in artistic response. Jeremy Begbie states, "An urge for transcendence is what makes most people want to write, paint, sculpt, or dance in

25. Donald Fairbairn, "The Trinity" (lecture, St. John's Episcopal Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, July 31, 2011). Fairbairn's Sunday school lecture was helpful in this discussion. He speaks of the priority in the Father who instigates the divine will while the Son and Spirit carry it out. But this does not imply inequality. It would be considered inequality only if one says that carrying out is less than instigating or that following is less than leading. Our societal culture may lead us to think that those actions are not equal, but not so with God. It is the paradoxical ways of God's kingdom. "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10.31). "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12.10). There is perfect equality in being and in relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

26. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 349.

the first place.”²⁷ I began this session with a moment of fun with the upbeat Motown hit song, “I’ll Take You There,” which speaks to the deep human desire to experience the transcendent. There are many kinds of beautiful artistic expressions that point us to transcendence which is a good thing in a world so often made small because of a one-dimensional here-and-now view of reality. For Jeremy Begbie, as a committed orthodox Christian, there can exist a particular place for art to bear witness to the Triune God of the Bible that is totally “*other* and *uncontainable*. God is transcendent in that God cannot be circumscribed or encompassed, grasped, or held by what is not God—and this includes of course, human language and thought.”²⁸ Begbie expounds upon the idea of God’s overflowing love coming down in Jesus Christ to unite us with Him in the power of the Holy Spirit. As such “transcendence is a function of God’s dynamic presence to and for the world, a world that is not divine.”²⁹ Thus, the arts while testifying to the transcendence of God, are most impactful when “they are fully creaturely, when, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, they point to share in, and contribute to the created world becoming more fully itself.”³⁰ I am not particularly artistic by nature, so was grateful to be able to consult with two different Christian artists. One, Rev. Dr. Ann Laird Jones, I have known from my summers in Montreat, North Carolina. Ann has been the director of arts ministry at Montreat Conference Center for the last 25 years as well as serving as a pastor in Greenville, Mississippi. The other artist was a new acquaintance, a friend of a friend, Kathryn Wysockey-Johnson. Kathryn is a visual artist in Vermont who is involved with her pastor husband in the non-profit

27. Bill Friskics-Warren, *I’ll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 11, quoted in Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1.

28. Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts*, 6.

29. Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts*, 131.

30. Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts*, 131.

organization, *Lumunos*. I spoke to both of these talented women on the phone, and they helped me think through some simple and manageable exercises to engage and enhance the women's response to what they were hearing and reflecting. Kathryn helped me formulate some challenging questions to ask the women as they sat with various art mediums. These questions included: "What shape or form expresses or comes to mind when you imagine the Trinity? What colors and textures come forth? How does one describe mystery in color? What helps integrate head and heart?"³¹ I was going to simply purchase some playdough and sketchpads, but both Kathryn and Ann enlarged my vision. Kathryn suggested the following supplies-paints, paper, pastel watercolor crayons, foam brushes to blur lines, magazines with words and pictures and glue sticks for collages. Ann, who is an accomplished potter suggest I use real clay, as from the earth, to accentuate the image-bearers we have been created to be. She connected me with someone at a local art studio to purchase real clay. "Clay," Ann said, "is an evocative medium that draws out another voice."³² Ann suggested that I read Scripture and play music while the women were interacting with the various art mediums. As the reflective music played in the background, I read from John 15, John 17, Colossians 1, Philippians 2, Galatians 4, and John 1. For some, like Makoto Fujimara, people experience and understand theology through the prism of art. Fujimara recalls experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit as a child long before he embraced Christianity. In his new book, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*, he writes "When we make, we invite the abundance of God's world into the reality of scarcity all about us."³³ One of the women went outside and brought in rocks and sticks and moss to help create her piece

31. Kathryn Wysocky-Johnson, phone conversation with author, January 5, 2020.

32. Rev. Dr. Ann Laird Jones, phone conversation with author, January 6, 2020.

33. Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 4.

of art. In my conversation with Ann, voicing my inadequacies about this part of the retreat, her wise response, which I shared with the women as they began was, “Biblical perfection is not a moral perfection but a *telios* of joy in God’s presence.”³⁴ It was this *telios* of joy that was sensed in both the laughter and thoughtful intensity of these moments together. We spent some time sharing why people chose the medium they chose and what they were attempting to express in their creations as we joined together for lunch and some free time for walks and naps that afternoon. I have attached several photographs of the women’s artwork in the appendix.³⁵

Teaching 3

Saturday afternoon we returned to our spot by the fireplace after having some rest and relaxation. After opening in prayer, I again reviewed the overall outline of the retreat of: Who is this God? What is he like? And now, why does it matter or what difference does it make?³⁶ I had intentionally woven in the “why” question from the beginning, as I did not intend for our teaching times to necessarily be only linear in nature. This is difficult to actually articulate because there is more than a cognitive understanding going on. It is Holy Spirit driven and experiential in nature to a point. There is some subjectivity to the conclusion that this *will* make a difference, because it made a big difference in my own life with God. I cannot assume though, that this will be the case for others. I focused on Barth’s phrase “God is as God acts” (my paraphrase).³⁷ Engaging with this Triune God then broadens our understanding of the redemption

34. Rev. Dr. Ann Laird Jones, phone conversation with author, January 6, 2020.

35. See Appendix B.

36. See Appendix B.

37. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols. ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1957-2010), II/1, 257.

that God provides through Christ and our life in Christ. We unpacked several verses at length that I wrote about chapters two and three in terms of understanding our engagement or approach to God. First was 2 Peter 3:14 speaking about participating in the divine nature, as partakers, fellowship, in communion (κοινωνοὶ) in the divine nature. In John 17, Jesus prays that we might be one as he is one with the Father, and that we would share in that relationship that Jesus has with the Father, stretching our view of salvation to be more than proclaimed forgiveness for our sin, but even more so, adopted as children of God (Galatians 4:4-6). Colossians 3:1-3 tells us that “our life is hidden with Christ in God.” When God sees us, he sees Jesus. Jesus became what we are so that we might become what he is. We are encouraged by Paul to set our mind on this Triune reality and to seek to abide and remain there. Jesus tells us in John 15 to “abide in his love.” To abide is to dwell; it is to be with God rather than doing for God. Jesus Christ is the perfect demonstration of what it means to be human, as he abided in his Father’s love. We too, are to dwell in the life of the Triune God. It takes intentionality to remain and abide. It takes mindfulness and regular feeding on Christ, as Jesus talked about in John 6:25-51. Once we finished this teaching time, I then created opportunity to experience mindfulness with an icon reflection exercise, followed by a brief Eucharist service in Montreat College’s Chapel of the Prodigal.

Rublev’s Icon Reflection

In 1411, the Russian monk Andrei Rublev painted one of the most admired icons among Western Christians entitled *The Old Testament Trinity*. This well-known icon has its background from the “three persons” visit to Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-2). These three as interpreted by Rublev, were the three persons of the Trinity. In the icon, the

Father is on the left in a robe of glowing golden-red with azure blue shining through. The Son is in the middle wearing a robe of deep purple-red signifying royalty with a blue mantle over his purple tunic indicating divinity. The Spirit, on the right, wears a green mantle over his blue, because green is the source of life, and the Spirit is the source of life. All three look quite similar, each with a halo of light about their head and carrying a red staff, an emblem of authority. Their eyes defer to one another. All of this reflects their Triune equality. As often is the style in iconography, the perspective of the picture is intentionally distorted and emphasized so that the viewer finds themselves invited to the table with the chalice leaning toward the viewer with an empty place set at the table, making the icon invitational to the viewer.³⁸ I had printed several poster size representations of the icon and after discussing the picture as a group, asked them to sit in front of the icon for a period of silence with piano music playing quietly in the background. I asked them to reflect on the 2 Peter passage as they gazed upon the icon. Did they experience an invitation? Did they think of God in any new or different way? Did they see themselves as partakers of divine nature? As often acknowledged, God is not fully known by defining Him, but by being known by Him and loving Him in return.

Eucharist Worship Service

I was fortunate enough to make some phone calls and have access to The Chapel of the Prodigal for an hour on Saturday evening from 5-6pm.³⁹ This indeed feels like a sacred space with a beautiful expansive Ben Long fresco, the *Return of the Prodigal*, painted on the interior

38. Frederica Matthews-Green, "Old Testament Trinity," in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 83-90.

39. See "The Chapel of the Prodigal," Montreat College, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.montreat.edu/about/locations/montreat/chapel-of-the-prodigal/>.

wall. Prior to our walk over to the chapel, we briefly discussed the theology of the Eucharist. My second-year residency project for this pastoral theology tract was entitled, *How to Nurture Our Life in the Trinity: A Conversation around the Eucharist*. I reviewed the presence, provision, and participation that takes place in the Eucharist. The Lord's Supper is our model of participation and John Calvin's theology of ascension caused him to rethink what takes place at the table. "For although the faithful come into this Communion (koinonia) on the very first day of their calling; nevertheless, in as much as the life of Christ increases in them, He daily offers Himself to be enjoyed by them. This is the Communion (koinonia) which they receive in the Sacred Supper."⁴⁰ "The liturgy of the Eucharist is best understood as a journey of the Church into the dimension of Kingdom. We use this word 'dimension' because it seems the best way to indicate the manner of our sacramental entrance into the risen life of Christ."⁴¹ I referenced Henri Nouwen's words, that at the Eucharist table, we not only remember what Christ has done and is doing, but we ourselves are "re-membered" by the living Christ at the table through the Spirit; we are reminded in life-giving ways that we are part and members of God's life.⁴² The worship service was simple, quiet, intimate, and meaningful as we shared the sacrament together in the twilight of the evening in such a beautiful space.⁴³ I gave a very short meditation on Matthew 11:25-30, "Come Unto Me," and also found a beautiful anthem which I played at the close of the service entitled "I Am Not My Own."⁴⁴

40. John Calvin, Letter to Peter Martyr Vermigli, 8 August 1555, as quoted in Julie Canlis, "The Geography of Participation: *In Christ* is Location, Location Location," *Ex Auditu* 33 (2017): 138.

41. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 35.

42. Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

43. See Appendix B.

Sacramental theology reminds us that at some point we move beyond rational discourse and debate into practice and that perhaps we do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity unless and until it is embodied. So the sacramental actions of the church--notably baptism and the Lord's Supper--are given to us specifically so that the Trinitarian nature character of the living God might be formed in us.⁴⁵

Feast and Film

We ended this eventful day with a gracious meal around the table that was prepared by one of the retreat attendees whose giftedness is gracious hospitality and cooking. She prepared quite the feast for all of us as we reflected on the events of the day around delicious food and wine. We ended the evening watching a movie together, entitled *Babette's Feast*. This movie tells the story of an elite French cook, Babette, who by the difficult circumstance of war, ends up in a remote tiny Danish town with a community made up of angry churchgoers who do not get along and find little joy in their life together. Babette keeps her identity as an exquisite chef a secret and takes the only job offered to her, that of a maid. Babette ends up winning lottery money and decides to spend every penny of it on preparing the most marvelous of feasts for this unknowing group of people. It is at Babette's table that as they enjoy the gifts of food and wine, they are invited into joyous community and healed in their relationships. A quote from the movie is that Babette shows her ability "to transform a dinner into a kind of love affair."⁴⁶ While the movie has no direct correlation with Trinitarian theology, I thought it to be a beautiful picture of the joy that takes place as we feast in God's presence and experience his love and healing. It is

44. Craig Courtney, "I Am Not My Own," performed by the Calvary Worship Choir, Roseville, MN, September 18, 2016, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eD6lkf9yXU0>.

45. Gordon T Smith, "The Sacraments and the Embodiment of Our Trinitarian Faith," in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 185.

46. Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 171.

known to be Pope Francis' favorite film because it "challenges us to look outside of ourselves and to see the beauty of God's joy and mercy."⁴⁷ I believe it is this joy and mercy that is reflected in the very being of the Triune God. This ended day two of the retreat weekend.

Day 3, Sunday, January 12, 2020

Day three began with coffee and packing up of belongings. We attended a 9:00am worship service at Montreat Christ Community Church. Prior to the service I challenged the women over coffee to be open and attentive to those places in worship where they possibly might experience anew the presence of the Triune nature of God as they worshiped.⁴⁸ As James Torrance states, "The trinitarian view of worship is that worship is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father."⁴⁹ Worship is indeed a place where God as "Triune God" shows up. Following the worship service, we went out for a hearty brunch and shared experiences that gave witness to the Triunity of God, both while in the morning's worship and over the entire weekend. The women filled out their post-retreat survey and packed up to leave. I reminded them they would be getting a weekly e-mail from me the next six weeks to prompt their journaling, along with a final survey with two questions.⁵⁰

47. Philip Kosloski, "Why does Pope Francis want us to watch the movie 'Babette's Feast'?", Aletheia, November 21, 2016, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://aleteia.org/2016/11/21/why-does-pope-francis-want-us-to-watch-the-movie-babettes-feast/>.

48. Appendix B.

49. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 30.

50. Appendix C.

Conclusion

I worked diligently at putting together a retreat that was informational, invitational, meaningful, enjoyable, and hopefully transformational. Regardless of the outcome of the results of the surveys and journals, I sensed that I had done just that. I attempted to create a place where mind, body, and spirit would and could encounter the Triune God. “The way to human wholeness which the gospel offers is found not through the assembling of detained facts and arguments in themselves, they will come in at the proper time-but through the imaginative leap to glimpse the larger world unveiled in the gospel.”⁵¹ My meager attempts in creating and planning this retreat were fueled by my heart to bring this imaginative leap to others.

51. N. T. Wright, “Foreword,” in Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), ix-x.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE OUTCOMES: WHAT COMES TO YOUR MIND WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

Introduction

My thesis question as stated in chapter one reads, is a Christian's approach and engagement with God enriched when God is known first and foremost as He is in His Triunity-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This certainly is not an easy question to answer. I realized as I have read over the questionnaires and journal entries in retrospect, that my passion for this topic has most likely influenced both my presentation and interpretation of my hypothesis. It feels difficult to be totally objective in making conclusions. But, as those in Scotland often say, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." In this conclusive chapter, I will examine, quantify, and qualify the results of my participants responses both during the weekend and over their next forty days and beyond and discern if engaging God primarily in his Triunity makes a difference in the Christian's life and engagement with God.

Questionnaire

From a purely statistical analysis, the amount of change in the questionnaire responses was minimal, but I believe relevant. Using a Likert scale questionnaire relating to Christian doctrine in a group of long time committed professing Christians can have limitations in its conclusive suppositions. All of these women affirmed their belief in the Trinity, so measuring change in that area of belief with numbers was a challenge. While I have some background in statistics from my nursing days, my current statistical analysis skills are lacking. With some help from my husband and son-in-law, the data was entered into a spreadsheet to consider the amount

of delta change, if any, in each of the questions from the beginning to the end of the weekend and to forty days out from the weekend. Also noteworthy, is that based on the journal entries, some women were actively reading Fairbairn's book they received, *Life in the Trinity*. This reading may have clarified for some, their ability to acknowledge and understand the questions more fully. I chose to present the statistical data separating the positive change from the negative change to emphasize the objectives of what I was teaching.

Table 1. Change in Responses

Question #	1/10/20	1/12/20	3/7/20	Question
1	3.38	+0.50	+0.75	When I think of God, I think of His Oneness.
2	4.50	+0.25	+0.38	When I think of God, I think of the Trinity.
4	4.38	+0.50	+0.25	When I think of God, I think of beauty.
5	3.94	+0.19	+0.06	I believe that what I know about God is related to what I know about myself.
7	3.00	+0.38	0.00	I understand a 'personal relationship with Christ' to be inviting Jesus into my heart.
8	1.75	+2.38	+1.88	I know historically how the doctrine of the Trinity came into being.
9	4.25	0.00	+0.18	I believe the Trinity to be the ultimate truth about God.
10	4.50	+0.19	+0.38	I believe the Trinity expresses the heart and nature of God.
11	3.88	+0.38	+0.81	I believe the Trinity is important to my everyday life as a Christian and I am able to articulate that to another.
12	3.50	+0.75	+1.00	I understand and experience spiritual maturity as union with Christ.
Average		+0.55	+0.57	
3	4.88	-0.13	-0.38	When I think of God, I think of power.
6	3.25	-0.50	-0.38	I understand salvation as primarily being saved from my sins.
Average		-0.31	-0.38	

Table 2. Percentage Change in Response

Question #	1/10/20	1/12/20	3/7/20	Question
1	3.38	+14.8%	+22.2%	When I think of God, I think of His Oneness.
2	4.50	+5.6%	+8.3%	When I think of God, I think of the Trinity.
4	4.38	+11.4%	+5.7%	When I think of God, I think of beauty.
5	3.94	+4.8%	+1.6%	I believe that what I know about God is related to what I know about myself.
7	3.00	+12.5%	0.0%	I understand a 'personal relationship with Christ' to be inviting Jesus into my heart.
8	1.75	+135.7%	+107.1%	I know historically how the doctrine of the Trinity came into being.
9	4.25	0.0%	+4.2%	I believe the Trinity to be the ultimate truth about God.
10	4.50	+4.2%	+8.3%	I believe the Trinity expresses the heart and nature of God.
11	3.88	+9.7%	+21.0%	I believe the Trinity is important to my everyday life as a Christian and I am able to articulate that to another.
12	3.50	+21.4%	+28.6%	I understand and experience spiritual maturity as union with Christ.
Average		+22.0%	+20.7%	
3	4.88	-2.6%	-7.7%	When I think of God, I think of power.
6	3.25	-15.4%	-11.5%	I understand salvation as primarily being saved from my sins.
Average		-9.0%	-9.6%	

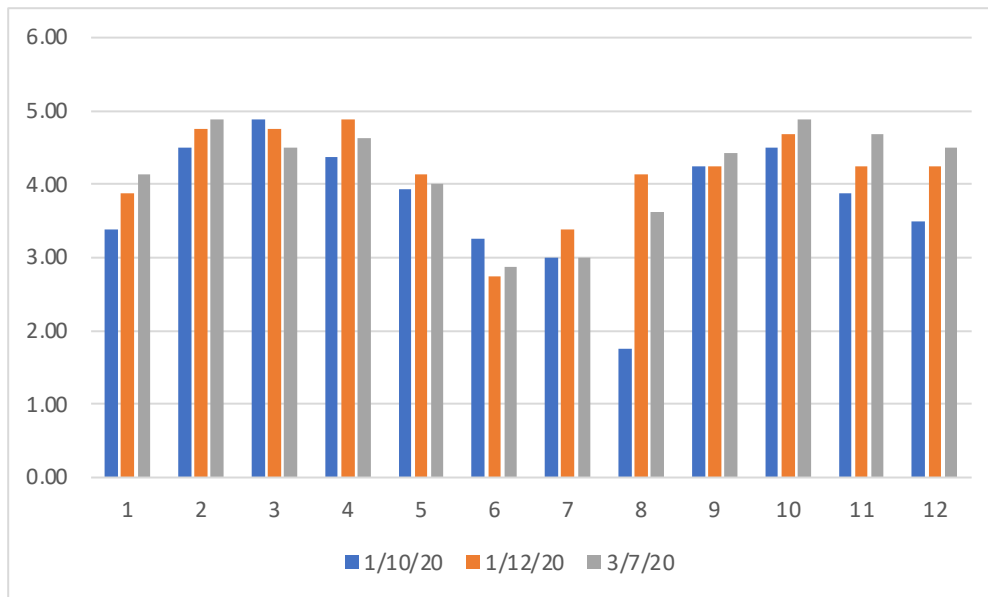


Figure 1. Graph of Changes

In both the numerical analyses and the graphical illustrations, from initial collection of data to final collection of data, there was a positive change in nine of the questions, a negative change in two of the questions, and one question that had no change.¹ I will briefly discuss each question and some of the implications of the comments made.

Question 1: When I think of God I think of His Oneness

The answers to this question increased overall in a positive change. There were several remarks in the answers that commented on how they now understood and thought of God's oneness as expressed in God's threeness. This was not a linear pattern of change over the forty days. Each participants' response varied throughout the period. I believe that the wording of this question might have been more informative and clarifying if I had written it as "When I think of God, I think of One."

1. Questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 had a positive change. Questions 3 and 6 had a negative change. Question 7 had positive change immediately after the retreat but no change from the beginning to final survey.

Question 2: When I think of God I think of the Trinity

The answers to this question increased overall in a positive change, however not as high as a percentage change as the first question. This surprised me somewhat. As explained earlier, this group has a longstanding Christian faith, and with that, obviously comes the belief in the Trinity. However, because I had not or do not regularly hear my congregants talking about God in that way, or praying in the name of the Trinity, or making references to the Trinity when we study Scripture together, I was surprised in this very slight degree of change. Since my retreat emphasis was on the Triunity of God, I had anticipated that there would be more change here. Yet also impacting this result is the fact that the base value for this question was high to begin with (4.5 compared to 3.38 in question 1 about God's oneness). This reflects that this knowledgeable group of Christian women already possessed a sense of God as Trinity to a high degree, so there was not as much room for this number to increase. This is where I believe the qualitative data (journals/writing/reflections) may bring more insight than the quantitative data in potential transformative change.

Question 3: When I think of God I think of power

The answers to this question had a slight overall change in the negative. The participants acknowledged God's sovereign providential power which I would anticipate (4.88). However, my teaching objective was that they would come to understand that power not in terms of divine fiat, rather in terms of God's faithful and vulnerable costly love. This would then be reason for a negative numerical change. Some comments that were written with this question post-retreat were as follows: "I agree, but not strongly. The first thought is love."² "What a powerful God

2. Participant G, 1/12/20, comment on #3 in immediate post-retreat questionnaire.

who is tempered by love.”³ “Power to create the world—a loving, giving, sharing power not a domineering manipulative power.”⁴ “Yes power, but more often kindness.”⁵ These comments acknowledge an understanding that God’s power is different than our worldly understanding of power.

Question 4: When I think of God I think of beauty

The answers to this question had a slight increase in positive change. Interesting the change was greater immediately post-retreat than forty days out. Possibly, the beauty and solitude of the setting we were able to enjoy over the weekend can explain that variance. I also had the attendees journal on this statement in one of their reflection exercises post-retreat.

Question 5: I believe that what I know about God is related to what I know about myself

There was little change in response to this question, and some confusion in what the question was actually addressing in added comments to their answers such as: “Need to think about this.... I would like to think that what I know about myself is because of what I know about God.”⁶ “I don’t really think about this as much as what I know about the world around me.”⁷ Perhaps it would have been better stated to say, “I believe that what I know about myself is related to what I think about God.” For some attendees that is how they engaged with this

3. Participant C, 3/3/2020, comment on #3 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

4. Participant B, date not entered, comment on #3 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

5. Participant A, 3/7/2020, comment on #3 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

6. Participant H, 1/10/2020, comment on #5 in pre-retreat questionnaire.

7. Participant F, 1/9/2020, comment on #5 in pre-retreat questionnaire.

question with these comments: “I continue to grow in my understanding that how I know and see myself is directly related to what I know and learn about God and how He sees me.”⁸ Another, “I believe as I give myself more to God, I become more fully myself and who I was created to be.”⁹ Calvin’s words hold true here, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.... No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he lives and moves.”¹⁰

Question 6: I understand salvation as primarily being
saved from my sins

The overall response to this question was a change in the negative which was my teaching objective in this area. I desired to expand the women’s understanding of salvation to encompass both forgiveness of sin as well as enlarging this understanding to include the idea of adoption and sonship into God’s life. This seemed to resonate in some of their comments: “Saved from and save for so much more.”¹¹ “This has always been foundational to me. I am learning that not only am I saved from sin but saved to a relationship with Christ.”¹² “The study has really focused my awareness of the richness of possibility in the here and now into participation in the life of the Trinity and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ “It is so much more....

8. Participant E, 1/12/2020, comment on #5 in immediate post-retreat questionnaire.

9. Participant C, 3/3/2020, comment on #5 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (London: S.C.M. Press, 1961), 1.1.1.

11. Participant A, 3/7/2020, comment on #6 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

12. Participant E, 3/10/2020, comment on #6 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

13. Participant G, 2/26/2020, comment on #6 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

Saved from my sins so that I can be restored to fellowship with the Trinity. Also saved so that I can participate in the divine nature.”¹⁴

Question 7: I understand a ‘personal relationship with Christ’
to be inviting Jesus into my heart

There was little variance from the pre-retreat to the forty-day mark in this question. There was a slight change from the start of retreat to the end of retreat. This result surprised me because as much as I taught on God’s initiative of adopting us into the Father-Son relationship, I imagined that this would be reflected in their responses. However, in similar fashion to question 2, because of these women’s foundational faith commitment, quantitative data can sometimes be insufficient for evaluating transformative growth. If one considers the age and evangelical environment in which these women came to faith, I believe it makes sense that this is how they responded to this question. For many, including myself, the way I understood becoming a Christian was by my invitation for Jesus to come and reside in my heart. I now understand it to be much more than that, beginning with the initiative of God and the invitation into his life. This shifts the focus from “me and my response” to God and his initiative. Perhaps again this question reflects the challenges of a quantitative approach when gauging spiritual transformation in mature Christians. There was one comment by an attendee who answered this question with a 2, (disagree) saying, “I no longer see the personal relationship with Jesus as the initial asking but much more importantly how I respond to the relationship daily and how do I reflect it to the world?”¹⁵

14. Participant H, 2/29/2020, comment on #6 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

15. Participant C, 3/3/2020, comment on #7 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

Question 8: I know historically how the doctrine
of the Trinity came into being

This response was the one with the biggest degree of change (107%). I must confess that I was surprised that it was *this* question that had such significant change, because I did not spend a lot of time or energy on the historicity of this. However, this makes numerical sense as this was the lowest base number (1.75) in the questionnaire, and thus had the most room for increase. What this does signify is that people know little about the cost and sacrifice of how the doctrine of the Trinity came into being. I believe there is perhaps a gap of knowing and appreciating the history of Christian faith, the labor and thought of the Early Church Fathers, the weight of the Arian/Athanasius controversy, and how significant this is in informing the Christian life in the Trinity. God acts and reveals himself in all of history, because in reality, it is his-story, and we would all do well to be knowledgeable of, pay attention to, and be grateful for what has gone on before us.

Question 9: I believe the Trinity to be the ultimate truth about God

The comment consensus in this response was that they knew this to be true but acknowledged that they could not fully understand it. Two responders did not like this question because of my use of the word “ultimate.” Participant B answered 3 (neutral) because she said, “It is the wording. Love is the ultimate truth and the Trinity is that love in action, but love is the word I would first choose.”¹⁶ Participant H made this comment: “I would still say an ultimate truth, not sure I can say THE ultimate truth.”¹⁷ Others felt differently as one responder who

16. Participant B, date not noted, comment on #9 in the final post-retreat questionnaire.

17. Participant H, 1/12/2020, comment on #9 in the immediate post-retreat questionnaire. Unfortunately, she left this question blank on her final questionnaire (I think unintentionally as it was at a page turn juncture).

moved from a 4 to 5 on her response wrote this: “This is changing my whole concept on how everything came to be.”¹⁸ Clearly, I am biased here as I do believe this to be the ultimate truth about God, infusing his very nature.

Question 10: I believe the Trinity expresses
the heart and nature of God

There was a slight change in the answer to this question. In retrospect, it feels very similar to question nine, although it looks like it was received in a more positive light than the previous question, perhaps because of as noted, the word, ‘ultimate,’ in the previous question.

Question 11: I believe the Trinity is important to my everyday life
as a Christian and I am able to articulate that to another

The responders had a difficult time answering this question as it was written. Several commented that although they knew it was important to everyday life, they had difficulty articulating it. Three responders actually gave two different numbers in answering the question in three instances.¹⁹ So, they answered the first part of the question one way and then the second part with another number. For analytical purposes I only used the first number in those three cases. In retrospect, I should have made these two separate questions. These responses may imply that believers feel they lack an accessible language to communicate the significance of the Trinity in their lives (and thus one of the fundamental drivers behind my thesis).

18. Participant C, 3/3/2020, comment on #9 in the final post-retreat questionnaire.

19. Participants D, (1/10/2020) E, (3/7/2020) and H (3/7/2020).

Question 12: I understand and experience spiritual maturity as union with Christ

This question had the second highest percentage of positive change from start to finish. Perhaps this signifies the participants beginning to express their initial grasp of the Father-Son relationship idea and the understanding of adoption and Sonship and participation. Certainly, one cannot expect concepts and teachings as comprehensive as the Trinity to be perceived in one weekend. Yet, this slight positive change shows the beginning of engaging with some new ideas. One comment was “understanding is one thing; experiencing is another-it takes practice and quiet times of insight sometimes.”²⁰ Another stated, “This is still developing in me.”²¹ Our union with Christ, our *telios*, or maturity/perfection in Christ is only known in part in this life, as we learn to abide in him and he in us by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. “To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

Survey Question Conclusions

In summary of looking at these twelve questions, I have a few conclusions. First, is that quantitative statistics feel inadequate and almost pedantic to measure one’s life with God. As a prior research nurse, I understand the importance of statistics. And although I noted change (mostly slight) in the attendees’ responses, I do not feel like that this survey gave a lot of insightful information. I also think, in retrospect, that the questions I developed could have been worded more thoughtfully. One can also look at the difference of percentage change immediately at the end of the retreat and then again at the forty-day point. One can sense the impact of the

20. Participant A, 3/7/2020, comment on #12 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

21. Participant C, 3/3/2020, comment on #12 in final post-retreat questionnaire.

response as related to the immediacy of the retreat, kind of like a “mountain-top” experience with new ideas. For example, on question 6, *I understand salvation as primarily being saved from my sins*, participant D went from a 3 (neutral) with the comment “saved and delivered from consequences and now adopted” (her underline) in her immediate post-retreat questionnaire (1/12/2020). In her final post-retreat questionnaire, she put a 5 (strongly agree) with the comment “Salvation is deliverance from my sins and its consequences. Jesus is my deliverer.” Perhaps what she heard and experienced over the weekend did not continue to engage her. There is definite subjectivity involved going forward in the forty days as well. This reflects the various dimensions of Vanhoozer’s aforementioned cognitive, volitional, and relational theological core exercises and practices that impact our engagement with God. Some participants continued to ponder these ideas and read more on them, whereas others relied solely on their memory of what took place at the retreat and how they experienced and continue to experience their life with God. One journal comment said it this way: “We were asked several questions this past weekend, questions that I found difficult to answer articulately and truly from the heart, on the spot.... One of the things I learned about myself is that it often helps to step back before answering or responding to things in life.”²² I am grateful for that reason that I have both weekly journal reflections as well as actual qualitative questions pre and post retreat, which I will now address.

Journal Reflections

The collection of journal reflections (Appendix C) that were sent out weekly by e-mail were meant to stimulate the attendees’ thinking on God as Triune in their daily life with God in

22. Participant B journaling January 13, 2020, after the retreat.

areas of prayer, Bible reading, and general reflection. Journal reflections allows one to think through in a personal way their assimilation of thought. “A journal also allows one to grapple with the deep and lasting effect that fieldwork produces...which is often more evident when analyzing data than when collecting it.”²³ I have abbreviated the journal assignments below for brevity; the entire collection of reflection prompts is found in the appendix. It would be too expansive to write all of what everyone wrote (one attendee returned a one and one-half inch three ring binder with over 150 typed pages in addition to her retreat journal!). I will highlight quotes that I believe helpful in evaluating my thesis-project hypothesis.

First Week

Reflect on the past weekend this week. When you ponder ‘What is this Triune God Like?’ do you experience any change in your mind, your experience, or your actions?

Attendee A - “I have had two changes in my thinking: Jesus referred to God as his Father, his Abba—I need to think of God as my Daddy first—this changes my self-awareness”; and “Since I have access to the Triune God, why wouldn’t I want to look at all three throughout my day?” (1/18/2020).

Attendee B - “I just loved the time with women and discerned in discussing God as Father that I am not the only one whose earthly “father” figure had been “less than.” The concept of Triune loving God is much easier to accept than that of a stern or coercive sort of punishing and judgmental father God. To be accepted and invited is a reflection of what I know in my heart a loving God is in life. That was not always true for me though.... To be invited into someone’s home and to be provided for and cared for and offered fellowship and teaching and entertainment

23. Loraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes, and Malcom Tight, *How to Research*, 4th ed. (Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill Open University Press, 2010), 48.

amongst friends is a lovely and wonderful thing. Even as I write this and I think of this world, this creation as God's home, the place we have been invited into a life where all that is good is available, it makes me feel grateful. I loved the "art" reflection time, the time to be together with others while pondering the essence of God with our hands.... Creativity has for years been a way of perceiving and hearing and seeing" (01/13/2020). "I left this weekend with my heart pricked with love" (undated but in weekend journal so presumably 1/13/2020).

Attendee C - "I talked to my husband about being invited into the Divine Life. I think that this invitation rings true in so many yearnings we have and what we strive for. We all want significance and what could be more significant than being invited into the divine and eternal exchange of love that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.... I think the biggest change this will bring to me is being less 'me'-centric and more God-centric. I want to start each day with 'How is God wooing me today or calling me to participate with Him in this Divine life?... I need to develop eyes for the invitation and then respond to it.... I think an attitude of thanksgiving will develop in my heart as a result of God's invitation to me" (01/13/2020).

Attendee D - "It has been an amazing feeling/experience this week—I have felt God's presence all around me as I have thought of Him in the three parts of the Trinity; I feel much more surrounded and protected—hard to explain—when I read scripture or a devotion or sing a song.... I love the awareness" (no date but week of January 13, 2020). "Girl at work tends to be very negative. Thinking about what Jesus would do and asking Holy Spirit to give me wisdom. I am trying to focus on all three parts of the Trinity as I go through each day. It really does make a difference" (02/17/2020).

Attendee E - This attendee took the first week in her journal to affirm her deep belief in the Trinity looking specifically at Romans 8. "In response to Leslie's teaching on the Trinity, I want

to take this first week looking at things through the lens of Trinity before I try to look ahead at what I have believed and know about God and whether I have learned something new”

(1/13/2020). As she read through Romans 8, she asks, “Am I seeing the presence of the 3 in 1 because I have new eyes to see? Or is this something I have always known?” (1/18/2020).

“Leslie’s first question to reflect on ‘how do I experience the Trinity?’ God as three unique beings who have different roles but are still one God. I don’t think as humans we will ever comprehend, but that’s okay. We are not intended to have the mind of God. But the awareness of all three—all unique and yet the same—is a place where I can grow in my faith in understanding and placing full confidence in God as Father Son, and Holy Spirit” (1/21/2020).

Attendee F - “I have experienced a heightened sense of the presence and importance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By this I mean that I think in these terms as I pray, as I observe life around me, and as I recognize and give thanks for all my blessings” (01/20/2020).

Attendee G - This participant is regularly reading through Fairbairn’s book and comments on her readings. “I was thinking about our adoption into the relationship between the Father and the Son. Since adoption is a theme in my family (my sister’s three children were all adopted and her oldest, my niece, has adopted five children, it was good to reflect on the love and caring attention that are part of those relationships” (01/16/2020). This attendee is also struggling with the polarized world split by sin and is burdened for people in ministry asked to leave their positions because of their sexuality. She writes “I am hoping for greater understanding in this area as I continue to study” (1/20/2020).

Attendee H - This participant is also regularly reading through Fairbairn’s book. She notes a difference and clarity in “being imitators of Christ vs. knowing that the Holy Spirit lives within me; healing, enabling, and leading me to love and serve others—the difference between the Holy

Spirit empowering and guiding versus the Holy Spirit dwelling and living within me.... I have known this as a Biblical truth but have never really grasped a deep understanding of what it means. My sense has been that we are more conduits of his power and presence. Dwell means something much more. What does linking our lives directly to his (Jesus') own relationship with God the Father actually mean (page 28 in Fairbairn)?" (date noted as week 1).

The objective in this first week reflection was to prompt the women to articulate what stood out from the weekend, what they had questions about, where they perhaps disagreed, where ideas were challenged, and to begin to ponder any transformative impact. What I heard in their journal entries was just that.

Second Week

Reflect on Karl Barth's words, "The triunity of God is the secret of His beauty."

Attendee A - "I've never thought of beauty outside of the visual sense.... Does the work of the three-person God play off of each other, magnifying His being? Can we fully appreciate the acts of Jesus apart from the Father? Can we grasp the works of the Spirit apart from the Father and the Son? Is there a harmony that is beautiful as we truly understand it?" (01/22/2020) "The Triune God-each working together almost like a beautiful dance. Thank you, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for revealing this to me" (01/27/2020).

Attendee B - This response was a photograph of an orchid with her original poem (1/20/2020):

Drop away all other quests
Just think on love its manifest
Winged seraphim in orchid bloom
Declareth glory that consume
All thought and mind
And heart doth soothe
Beauty with its simple truth
Announced glory, Earth full of it
Love Divine our benefit.

Attendee C – “I am struck by the fact that our God, who existed outside of time – full of majesty and power – still wants to be present with us. It is in the grace of his presence with us that is the hallmark of or showcase of His beauty. God’s presence with us on earth was through His Son and His ongoing indwelling presence comes in the form of His Holy Spirit. This presence, and desire to be present and habitate with us is the *Glory of the Lord*” (01/20/2020).

Attendee D – “So the beauty to me is that God is one, but He shows Himself to me in different ways, everything I need is wrapped up in His three beings.... God as Father—is my Father.... Jesus is my example of how to live in the world and how to love others and treat others and my hope for eternal life, and the Holy Spirit is my guide (conscience). Boy this is hard to explain but what an exciting feeling it gives—He really is everything and gives me everything I need in this life to live for Him through the different versions of Himself. And that is a BEAUTIFUL THING!” (date noted as week 2).

Attendee E – “I can’t add anything meaningful to Karl Barth. I think I understand though. God is mystery. He should be.... Because God is mystery, He is someone/something beyond my reach. It makes Him unique/special/even beautiful. The full mystery of how the Trinity can exist and create, makes God who He is” (1/24/2020).

Attendee F – “I picture the three parts in a circle-holding hands-in perfect sync—a beautiful rhythmic dance” (01/26/2020). “They are independent and dependent at the same time” (1/30/2020).

Attendee G – “What is God’s beauty as we perceive it?... Creativity, grace, mercy, justice, order, love. Because we are His creatures, we can only perceive His beauty through the gift of His Spirit and Son. The gift of God’s triunity is interactive relationship and community. So this is also included in our essence as being in His image—so much of the beauty that we experience in life is also from our relational side; our bent toward community” (01/22/2020).

Attendee H – This woman actually added, what she accurately said was, the “rest of quote” (I didn’t realize I had cut it short). ““The triunity of God is the secret of His beauty. *If we deny this, we have a God without radiance and without joy.*’ I see God’s beauty in his creation, his holiness, his faithfulness, his longing for all to know him...in his word...in human life and relationships...in art.... All of these and much more provides evidence of the beauty of God. Yet, it is my life as a follower of the Triune God that enables me to see and experience and understand (to some degree) the beauty and gifts of God lived out in the Trinitarian relationship. Still have much to learn...easier for me to see outward manifestations of God’s love and presence than to understand the reflection of them within and between the Trinitarian relationship” (date noted as Reflection week 2).

I was grateful that the women began to connect the beauty that they experience in this life, both in creation and in life experience and relationships, with the beauty of God’s very Triune being. The first and final poem lines of attendee B’s reflection sums this up so beautifully, “Drop away all other quests, just think on love its manifest.... Love Divine our benefit.”

Third Week

Has thinking of God in His Triunity affected your prayer life? (C.S. Lewis quote.)

An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But if he is a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that whole threefold life the three-personal Being is actually going on in the ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers.²⁴

Attendee A – “Yes in some ways, and hopefully in more ways to come. I recognize it is the Holy Spirit prompting me to pray. What I haven’t done is reflect on Christ who is praying for me. So when I specifically have a time of prayer rather than just list all my petitions for people and situations I should probably reflect on not only what the Spirit is bringing to mind, but what would Jesus be praying about, for, and with me?” (01/30/2020) “One way that I have incorporated the Trinity into my daily life is through my physical therapy exercise—a stretching that is done in three parts—bowing over my leg—I pray to the Father, bowing leftward over my leg—I pray to the Son, and bowing rightward over my leg—I pray to the Spirit. As I do this daily exercise, I invite the Trinity to enter into my healing” (02/01/2020).

Attendee B – “The first thing that comes to mind when I see ‘prayer life’ in this week’s prompt is my (theory) wondering about the concept of unceasing prayer that Paul calls us to—actually life in constant ‘communion, an awareness’ of the direction of the Holy Spirit 24/7? Is this unceasing prayer, actually life in constant ‘communion?’ Is that even possible for us as not divine? Though Jesus often went away for prayer, I understand His life as divine to be continual communion with God the Father” (01/27/2020). “You have to see it to be it. I woke during the

24. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 163.

night with those words whispered in my head after reading the 4th book of *Mere Christianity*, ‘Your real self, new self (which is Christ’s and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him.’ Could it be that the more I am able to abide, commune, the more I am actually in prayer with God? Is unceasing prayer the ability to commune, and abide constantly? If so is that the goal? If so then we must be able to discern who God is, when it is His thought or prompt we are hearing and not our own. We must be able to discern what keeps us from the alertness, awareness” (1/28/2020). This participant tends to write in streams of consciousness thus some disjointed sentences, but rich thoughts.

Attendee C – “I had not thought of the concepts of the Trinity affecting my prayer life until this question was posed. This makes me examine who I pray to when I pray. When I bring my initial needs and bare myself in front of God, I feel like I’m praying right into the heart of God, the Father. I want to not hold anything back and there is a real trust there because even when I reveal the warring desires of my heart, I know that I’m not going to be met with condemnation, but with love.... As I open my heart to the Father, this enables the Spirit to work within me.... Jesus said God is seeking those who worship Him in Spirit and Truth in John 4.... How do I approach Him?... I also think closely tied to this is sacrifice. When we pray, we should be willing to sacrifice our plans or hold them loosely for the bigger notion of God’s kingdom. This is an idea that just came to me as we pray and worship in Spirit and Truth. In sacrifice, we join in Christ’s work” (01/27/2020).

Attendee D – “Oh thank you for this quote from C. S. Lewis—that is exactly what I have been feeling but didn’t know how to articulate it. I am trying to reach this all-powerful God and the example I have is from Jesus Christ being prompted by the Holy Spirit. Thinking of the Trinity, I

am sensing more awareness of His presence—His presence seems bigger (although I know it's no different). His presence seems more real.... As I go through my days though I have found that if I don't continue to make a conscious choice to think of the awesome thought of the Trinity's presence, then I fall back into my old thought pattern (or lack of thought) and nothing changes. I need to train my mind to stop and think/pause so that this thought of the Trinity becomes a more natural response in my life" (date noted as week 3).

Attendee E – "I have never read this quote from C. S. Lewis, but I love it. I can almost hear my grandmother's voice in this explanation. She always told me to be grateful-grateful to be called into the family of God. Grateful to be called as His child. Why? Because it is God that does all the work.... She never really talked about the Trinity per se, but she clearly believed and lived out the understanding of God doing all the work in our lives through the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She would encourage me to embrace Him-not fight Him, and to enjoy Him. She was a huge prayer person. I remember walking in her house in the mornings and see her on her knees. She clearly understood C. S. Lewis' point. Do I?" (1/28/2020).

Attendee F – "In my prayer life, I almost always pray to God the Father, or I call on the power of the Holy Spirit to move, to act, to surround. I don't often pray to Jesus unless I am asking him to intervene on my behalf. I do believe it is God in me who draws me near and prompts me to pray" (01/30/2020).

Attendee G – "I tend to go to God the Father for my requests and gratitude, intercession for others; to Jesus for understanding, for insight into how to approach daily life based on His example, comfort when I need to be understood; to the Holy Spirit when I am frustrated about my Christian life when I feel incapable of changing or forgiving" (02/02/2020).

Attendee H – “I am trying to listen more as I pray. I am mindful of how God in His three persons is interacting in prayer. As I read or listen to prayers I am now watching for “signs of the Trinity or of Trinitarian theology” (dated noted as Reflection Week 3).

This C. S. Lewis quote was appreciated by many. Prayer is the most intimate language that we share with God. Reading the women’s prayers and the desires of their hearts as they engaged with the Triunity of God in that sacred place was a such a gift. How they wrote their prayers for others as well as praying through pain in their own life situations was rich and thoughtful and a blessing to read.

Fourth Week

Have you experienced change in reflecting on Scripture through a Trinitarian Lens?
(*Ephesians 1:3-14*)

Attendee A – “Yes, I pay more attention to the Scripture references to the three parts of the Trinity. I have never seen so very many references to the Holy Spirit as I am seeing these days. Reflecting on Ephesians passage.... Blessings through the Father, blessings through the Son, and blessings through the Holy Spirit. There are many crossovers in these blessings. Some are unique. It is hard to grasp how much I have been given. Thank you, God” (02/09/2020).

Attendee B – This attendee began her weekly journal reflection on Ephesians with a journey through all her notes and studies on the book of Ephesians that she had collected over many years. She began with a quote from Oswald Chambers (with no reference), “the author who benefits you most is not the one who tells you something you did not know, but the one who gives expressions to the truth that has been dumbly struggling in you for utterance” (02/03/2020). She continues that she will pray that reality as she interacts with the Ephesians

passage. The next day this respondent wrote out the Ephesians 1 passage in the ESV, Living Bible, Message, and listened to it in song. She writes, “My first thought is that I would like to add ‘all’ after each ‘us’ and believe is it God’s desire for all to be adopted, which is the primary reason for our discipleship. I pray this for my entire family and my hearts longs for my sons to choose a life of belief” (02/04/2020).

Attendee C – “I can’t believe it has been four weeks since we started our reflecting and since these concepts about the Trinity were introduced to us. I have spent much time pondering them and have found myself wanting them to make a difference in my life and in my interaction with Westminster. I think for me, the Triune nature of God has cemented some things that I have always been thinking, namely that love started everything on this earth and pre-existed all space and time. The concept of being invited in to experience the divine love that exists within the Trinity puts a new spin, or tweaks, what I had already been thinking.... In this past year I had already been looking at the Ephesians 1 passage in a new way. I took my emphasis off the who of predestination and placed it on the in love’ part.... Fairbairn’s book makes the point that God’s glory actually means His presence. I think when we start to take in the magnitude of God’s plan and the love behind it, we start to glimpse God in His glory and actually participate in the wonder and awe and love that exists between Father-Son and Holy Spirit.... The language of this passage is so lofty and is meant to point us to the grace, love, and wisdom that exists outside of ourselves and does not depend on us-it is otherworldly and kept in heaven for us. For now, we can bask in it and reflect on it” (02/03/2020).

Attendee D – “As I read the Scripture passage the parts of the Trinity really pop out at me.... John 14:15-16.... As I read Scripture now, I find myself consciously (and perhaps unconsciously) looking for the different parts of the Trinity. In a way it helps me to understand

the Scriptures better and maybe even a little better understanding of God’s redemptive plan” (date noted as week 4).

Attendee E – This responder marked the different names of God in red through the Ephesians passage—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their referenced pronouns. “Ephesians 1:3-14 demonstrates how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all work together for us because the Triune God loves us...me” (02/05/2020).

Attendee F – “I have definitely experienced a difference in that I have developed a listening ear for references, descriptions, illustrations and examples of God the Father, Holy Spirit, and Son in all things I see, hear, and read. It is in the forefront of my brain rather than the back shelf! This Ephesians passage sparks to mind the question we discussed in Montreat regarding hierarchy—is any one part in higher authority?... It reads to me that God the Father has dominion?” (date noted as 4th refectio).

Attendee G – “I was taken with the closing part of the Ephesians Scripture.... ‘We’re sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory.’ For some reason the Holy Spirit is more difficult to capture as an entity to include in my prayers. I would tend to ask the Father or Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to help me. But the Holy Spirit has already been sent, so a more direct approach might be appropriate. I am amazed that the Church was able to work out the doctrine of the Trinity without completely falling apart. It is very interesting that Paul’s words in the Ephesians letter are so Trinitarian—it shows us that this doctrine was a part of Christian thought at a very early period—before the Church Fathers put together so many more words and analyses” (02/04/2020).

Attendee H – “God is the Father of Jesus.... In Christ we are blessed by the Father.... In the Holy Spirit God fulfilled His promise to remain with his followers. Christ is the center of God’s plan. This verse(s) clearly shows the interwoven nature of the Trinity” (date noted as Week 4 Reflection).

As I read through the journals on this reflection, what was quite evident was how knowledgeable these women are of Scripture and their desire to look at many other passages, not just this Ephesians passage, through a Trinitarian lens. They did that not only in this week’s reflection, but some did this all through their journals. This was certainly one of my teaching objectives, as when one is looking for it, the Trinity is everywhere in Scripture.

Fifth Week

Reflecting this week on your understanding of salvation.

Attendee A – “God’s purpose all along was that we would know Him, love Him, walk, and talk with Him; to commune with Him, we are His children. God cannot tolerate sin, so He sacrificed His Son to save us. But His purpose at creation never changed. What He made was very good. Through salvation we are being saved to our place at creation” (02/12/2020).

Attendee B – This attendee had been at a Michael Card conference at church over the weekend and had been introduced to the word *hesed* in Scripture. She writes, “Hesed is a beautiful portrait of the nature of God as defined in the thread of a Hebrew word that weaves together God’s responses to his people throughout scripture.... So what are saved for? Why has God chosen to redeem us? To walk with Him, to rejoice and do life with Him, to love and enjoy Him and this marvelous world he has provided...hesed,” (02/10/2020). “God desires for all people to live beloved” (02/13/2020).

Attendee C – “I think one big take away that I have in studying the Trinity is how it has enriched my life here and now. I think about how I’m invited into the exchange of divine love this very minute and how does it change what I am doing? I think we tend to look at our salvation as a far-off thing, but we are saved—or being saved—right now. We’re in process—so what does that look like? I think it looks like having eyes to see and ears to hear how God’s kingdom can bring healing and wholeness to the world through our actions. Are we willing to give more and more of ourselves to the Spirit’s control and allow the Spirit to use us as restoring agents in the world?... Fairbairn says that Christ is not only the means of salvation, but is also the content of salvation, which is ongoing fellowship with Him” (02/10/2020).

Attendee D – “I admit have struggled with this question. I think of ‘salvation’ as a deliverance from my sin and its consequences, and of course Jesus is the deliverer.... What are we saved from? We are saved from being separated from God.... We are saved for God.... Those are basic answers. I have to admit that I wondered what you were getting at, but now as I have focused more on Trinity, I see that unique relationship God and Jesus have toward one another (which I cannot fully grasp) but would my salvation bring that type of relationship for me with Jesus? Wouldn’t that be awesome?” (dated week 5).

Attendee E – “The specific roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in salvation are not news to me but reflecting on this hammers at least one new thing home. All three made this plan. For their desire/benefit. The Father did not impose His will on an unwilling Son or a disinterested Spirit. All parts of the Triune God were in on this, wanted to save us, loved the world deeply, continues to want a relationship with mankind for now and eternity, even in our sin.... Surely, I can see more and more how all three parts of the Triune God are still at work in me and the world around me” (02/11/2020).

Attendee F – “John 3:16 was the first scripture I ever memorized as a child and in my early Baptist tradition it shaped my understanding of salvation. As a child salvation was to escape the fires of hell and the tragedy of living apart from God. My understanding has changed over the years, yet I understand nothing at all! We don’t really have any answers. I don’t understand God’s plan for the Jews, the unbelievers etc.? I believe and trust He has a plan, yet...” (date noted as 5th entry).

Attendee G – “Salvation, at least at first thought, would automatically come up as bringing the reward of eternal life. But if the gift of salvation is fellowship (participation) in the love between the entities of the Holy Spirit, salvation has a present component that we miss. So many times, I’ve been frustrated as I read theology and study and try to bring myself closer to God, and I come up empty. Trying to reach God through intellect is a Sisyphus task. What one needs for a present, living relationship is this participation. As my minister said Sunday, God is as close as your next breath. So maybe the fellowship is always there, and we only need for our eyes to be opened for our hearts to be able to participate. I hope so” (02/17/2020).

Attendee H – “Reading *Life in the Trinity*, helped in my understanding of the relationship of our sin to the Trinity, ‘the reason our human relationship and attitudes do look much like the way Christianity says they should is that humanity has lost its participation in the Son’s relationship to the Father’ (85)... ‘We were created to reflect and share in the fellowship of the Trinity...and because of the Fall we fall short’ (101)... We are saved to reflect the Father-Son relationship and love to a fallen and broken world” (dated noted Week 5 Reflection).

I have stated in the quantitative section that I perhaps had a bias with this area of teaching. My objective was to enlarge the retreat attendees’ understanding of salvation. And the reason for this objective was my desire for them to see the “much more” of what God has done

for us in Christ Jesus, and I believe these seeds were planted. “Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son” (Ephesians 1:4-6 MSG).

Sixth Week

Reflect on the idea of participation in God and its impact. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Attendee A – “It has made me see my pride more often and humbled me. It has enabled me to be more courageous. It has encouraged me to practice thankfulness. It has given me a greater desire for His word. In the midst of emotional hurt, it has allowed me to care for myself and at the same time forgive. It has enabled me to be more loving. It has prompted me to reach out when the Holy Spirit puts someone on my mind” (02/22/2020).

Attendee B – “Journaling on a regular basis does affect my thinking.... When we think on things of God with intention, and practice the disciplines regularly, it does make a difference in our thinking outside of the intentional time” (2/16/2020). “How do we ‘escape the corruption of this world caused by evil desires?’ How does the divine life keep us from it? It keeps our thought life true as we participate, living in awareness and expectancy of God’s interaction with us through the Holy Spirit and through reading and pondering the truth.... God has really been trying to get through to me about His true character for some time, but especially this last year.... Hymn writer Frederick Faber wrote, ‘There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, Like the wideness of the sea. But we make His love too narrow by false limits of our own; And we magnify his strictness with

a zeal He will not own.’ I am happy to join the ‘dance of the redeemed’ and the ‘laughter of the universe’ for I have confidence in the goodness of God” (02/22/2020).

Attendee C – “I think our study of the Triune nature of God has caused me to call upon the Holy Spirit more.... I think the exercise of going back to the Garden and examining the pre-Fall state of humanity—examining what we shared in relationship between the Father-Son and Holy Spirit has been helpful in understanding what we lost post-Fall and also in understanding God’s original intent for humanity.... These verses also mark the mechanism to escape the corruption of this world; is to participate in the divine nature. When we realize that as humans, we simply enter in this world within the backdrop of what was already been going on—this divine relationship that was already occurring—in fact, which had no beginning and has no end—this becomes the overarching reality, and we were born it is shadow. My life has purpose and meaning in how I reflect this” (02/17/2020).

Attendee D – no journal entry

Attendee E – “This is a hard reflection. Intellectually I know that He has given me everything I need to know Him and experience Him personally.... But daily do I rely on this?... The challenge for me is to transfer my intellectual understanding of the Triune God to a deeper understanding and experience with God in my spirit.... Lord, I truly want to participate in your will and plan in a way that honors you as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I want something deeper that will honor you as I work through my current pain and grief. I will pray this prayer and pray that you will be glorified in our circumstances and that you will be revealed to all of us” (02/18/2020).

Attendee F – “The biggest way thinking with a ‘triune mind’ has impacted me is that in reading or listening to anything that mentions God the Father, or Christ Jesus, or Holy Spirit is that my ears really perk up and listen for distinguishing details. It is as though I have re-trained my mind

to be alert to any-and-all attributes. I think I will carry this with me forever. I have questioned and marveled at the magnitude of the Trinity as a whole, but also as three. Thank you for the gift of this retreat and these expanded exercises” (date noted as 6th entry).

Attendee G – “Reflection on 2 Peter 1:3-4.... Awareness, the feeling of being accompanied, trust, connection/relationship, comfortable in one’s own skin” (02/18/2020). “I have been thinking about how difficult it is to be in the world (laundry, phone, texts, grocery, etc....) and still ‘participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.’... I love Fairbairn’s idea of sharing in the fellowship and joy between the Father and the Son in this life, but for me personally, how that happens on an daily level and what it feels like is still a mystery. Charlie T, a dear friend, at the end of his life gave a message to those at his funeral. The one thought Charlie wanted passed onto us was to commend to us ‘God awareness.’... Maybe that is what fellowship in the Trinity feels like” (02/24/2020). “While I struggle with the mystery of the Trinity, I ask questions like ‘does it really need to be this complex?’... A quote from I think Thomas Merton; ‘there is not enough time in one’s lifetime to re-examine and analyze every doctrine of the faith before one makes it one’s own. At some point one must rely on the wisdom and good faith of our ancestors who have gone before us.’ Better minds than mine and many of them, have drawn these conclusions through a lot of suffering and hard work and careful thought. This doctrine stands firm after generations, and I will go with it. Now the task is to access the fellowship of the Trinity as best I can” (02/25/2020).

Attendee H – “I continue to wrestle with what this ‘divine nature’ means for me in practical ways. How do I live differently if I believe (and I do) that I am an adopted daughter and share in the communion and relationship that Jesus has with the Father.... As God’s Spirit dwells within me and I embrace a deeper understanding of my life as a reflection of the love experienced

within the Trinity, then I hope to share more of these Godly qualities that Peter lists (5-7).... The phrase that keeps coming to my mind is from Francis Schaffer-How should we then live?"

(date noted as Week 6 Reflection).

These were deep reflections on a very complex conversation of spiritual formation enlarged to include our participation in God's Triune life. This of course, is not meant to lessen the significance of our practice of spiritual disciplines, but more to help these attendees embrace that our life with God always begins with God and what he is doing rather than our striving or doing or preforming for God.

Journal Conclusions

I think that the journal reflection exercises were effective in prompting the retreat attendees to ponder how thinking of God in a more Trinitarian way impacts their understanding of their life with God. I introduced a lot of new ideas over the weekend and several of the women resonated with those ideas, all the while wrestling with what it uniquely meant for their personal relationship with God. They asked themselves a lot of open-ended questions. They brought their desires to know God deeper before him in prayer. In retrospect, I see that perhaps a few of my survey questions and journal entries might have been presented in a manipulative way in how I was attempting to direct their thinking (such as my question/reflections about their understanding of salvation or their on-going relationship with Jesus, or my enthusiasm about Fairbairn's book/teachings). I am grateful for the challenges that some posed both in our conversation times and perhaps more freely in their journal reflections. I was humbled by their desire to openly go deeper in this journey with me through their honesty and vulnerability in their writings. As detailed, so many times throughout this thesis-project, my belief is that this journey of pondering

the Triunity of God can be transforming, or at least it has been for me, and I have felt compelled by God to encourage that in the lives of people around me. I want to end my conclusive reflections with where I began, considering the A. W. Tozer quote.

Pre- and Post-Retreat Question and Reflection

This thesis-project began with the A. W. Tozer quote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”²⁵ The day prior to the retreat was the first time they saw this quote (a bit paraphrased) from me. I sent an e-mail on January 9 seeking a response to end this sentence, “When you think of God, your first thought is...”. They brought this reflection and gave it to me before we kicked off our weekend. Forty days following the retreat and their journal exercises I sent another e-mail out on February 22 repeating this question exercise along with the final questionnaire survey and a final question: “Briefly reflect on whether your approach and engagement with God has been enlarged and enriched as you have considered and contemplated His Triune nature. (Please be honest!)” It took a week or two to get all of these reflections back, and I did not read any of them until I began to work on chapters 4 and 5. The results are as follows:

When you think of God, your first thought is...

Attendee A:

Day 1: “God the Father.... I struggle between my understanding of this person of the Trinity probably the most. The two concepts of Father and of King seem disparate to me. One seems close and adoring the other seated on a throne and judging” (01/09/2020).

25. Aiden Wilson Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 1.

Day 40: “He is a living, 3 person-being, here and available to me at all times. He wants to spend conscious intimate time with me. He wants to be fully known” (02/26/2020).

Response: “Yes my engagement with God has been enlarged and enriched. I look for His presence in more situations and confer with Him more. I want it to become natural, as if I had a guest living with us, but I think it takes more practice at first. My ‘knowing Him’ has been enlarged through good Bible study-revealing more of His nature.... And the journey has only begun” (02/26/2020).

Attendee B:

Day 1: “Loving” (01/09/2020).

Day 40: “Love—love as shown through God’s vulnerability through Christ, as shown through the power of God through creation and as shown through the generosity of God through the Holy Spirit and His benevolence and gentle beckoning to us all” (02/24/2020).

Response: “The vulnerability of God has been a new way of thinking of God for me and continues to evolve. I think for years I understood the concept of God as truly hierarchical and not relational, inviting, loving. Thinking about God was to think about His power, His majesty, His dominion. I believed His nature was more about ruling over than about sharing love.... This concept began to slowly change after I was in relationship with believers who believed in God as personal, relational, and approachable. It has changed and evolved, evolves still since I joined Westminster 26 years ago.... I had no clue that God was triune in nature from before the beginning of time. I thought of God as powerful, in exercising control over the world. It has been wonderful to comprehend the truth of a beckoning, gentle, and yes vulnerable communal Creator, who just really longed to have his family back. It has and continues to change my heart and thinking of who I was created to be” (02/24/2020).

Attendee C:

Day 1: “God is in a category that only He occupies. I think I’ve spent most of my life likening Him to things I’m familiar with, but in doing this I make him too small. I love thinking of Him in terms of dichotomies. I think He is huge, awe-inspiring magnificent, majestic, but yet able to present himself in a whisper. He is grander and has more power than the most powerful ruler, but His spirit and love may be exhibited most authentically in a frail old woman who have her life to orphans in Calcutta. God is all this but at the same time He is love. I’m allowing my mind to think more about God’s love and what it is. He made the world out of love and created humankind out of love. He did not need anything, but His act of creating was an act of love and gave His love an object. In doing so, He took the risk of not having His love returned, but He did it anyway and exhibited a self-giving love. Because of His love, this magnificent God is approachable, and I am grateful” (09/09/2020).

Day 40: “The Trinity” (03/03/2020).

Response: “Yes! I feel like understanding God’s Triune nature allows me to see how God has been reaching out to mankind. In essence, God became man so man in a sense could become divine. His nature is so inclusive and always reaching out to mankind. Viewing God through the lens of the Trinity enables me to understand the magnitude of His love. We are called to reflect the magnitude of His love to others” (03/03/2020).

Attendee D:

Day 1: “My best friend, my life-line, my purpose, my protector, my comforter” (01/10/2020).

Day 40: “My first thought of God is “LOVE.” The love and respect the Father and

Son have for each other has really come to light in my mind doing this concentration on the Trinity. I really have never thought about the relationship of God, Son, and Holy Spirit to each other. I, of course, knew the 3 parts of the Trinity, but never focused on the ‘relationship’ they have with each other” (dated final 40 day).

Response: “My engagement with God has been enlarged by my concentration on the Trinity. Not only as I study His Word do different parts of the Trinity pop out to me, but I find I pray maybe a little differently— think more about the Holy Spirit as I pray. I will say that coming home from the mountain, although not quite sure I understood it all, I was fired up to learn!... As the weeks went by it was easy to slip back into old routine and old thinking process, so it was good to have the 6 weeks to keep the Trinity at the forefront of my mind.... I know I have stated it several times but love thinking about the relationship between the Father and Son and Holy Spirit— don’t understand it obviously but different glimpses of that relationship enlarges my view of God Himself. I believe this is a growing process in my faith. I have not totally processed this yet.... My thoughts continue to grow and change” (dated final 40 day).

Attendee E:

Day 1: “My first thought of God is God the Father. God the Creator. God who is all powerful, all knowing, and ever present. A holy God. A righteous God. A God with a perfection standard. But this same God is all-loving. I am not afraid of His standard or His judgement. For in His great love for me, He gave His Son and then sent His Spirit. This all-powerful God who loves me devotedly is my source of hope in difficult times and my security of life eternal-one beyond what I see and know now” (01/10/2020).

Day 40: (She didn’t really answer this question) “Journaling is not easy for me—

lack of discipline, uncomfortableness, of seeing my thoughts rambled, unedited on paper, my tendency to think too linear, whatever the reasons I do not derive great joy from it. But I am thankful for the thoughtful prompts that have pushed me to think deeper. I think I was raised with strong Biblical teaching that communicated well the roles of the Father/Son/Holy Spirit. None were ignored, even if they weren't always given equal billing. So I don't think factually that I learned something that was not already familiar to me. However, the questions/reflections that pushed me to apply these principles and articulate how they impact my life were difficult. Do I really see all 3? Do I look for all 3? Do I consciously worship a God who is 3 and yet one? This is very important. Failing to see a piece of God for who He is, is to sell God short. Am I limiting God, not just who He is, but how He wants to impact my life? Is He just a powerful protector and provider? Of course not— He is also an encourager and sustainer through the Holy Spirit who enables me because of His Spirit to be the kind of woman I desire to be. He is also a Savior who lived like me and experienced emotions and temptations that I face. He can understand my loss because He too lost people He loved, as a human” (date noted as final thoughts).

Response: “I think my biggest take away is that I want to live with a much greater awareness of the whole power and personality of God as the Triune God. God is so much more than I acknowledge. God is so much more present in the world and in my life that I acknowledge. I want to know all of Him better. I want to experience more of Him. I want to see all of Him in my life more clearly. I want to understand how my current circumstances are consistent with God-working good in my life-not just giving lip service to this but truly understanding.... Lord, hear my prayer” (date noted as final thoughts).

Attendee F:

Day 1: “No doubts...complete confidence in who He is and what Scripture teaches about Him. Everything else flows out of this assurance” (01/09/2020).

Day 40: “He loves me” (no date noted).

Response: “100%. I feel like these exercises, the retreat, the book, etc. have in essence ‘re-trained’ my brain to be attuned to mentioning’s, discernments, characteristics, and qualities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It has caused me to think on new things and ask questions of myself” (no date noted).

Attendee G:

Day 1: “Father” (01/10/2020).

Day 40: “Much more likely to go to Father/Son/Holy Spirit” (02/26/2020).

Response: “I would say yes. Particularly in my awareness of the potential of sharing much more deeply in the relationship (and in connections and relationships in general) and the fellowship between the Father/Son/Holy Spirit. The study has really heightened my awareness of the multifaceted and life-giving and creative relationships among the Father/Son/Holy Spirit” (02/26/2020).

Attendee H:

Day 1: “Gratitude...that I have the privilege to even speak with him and the hope/belief that the Holy God of the universe cares and is listening” (01/09/2020).

Day 40: “As I have thought of God during these 40 days my mind goes to wondering more deeply and longing for understanding of the relationship of the Trinity. I have thought more about the oneness of God, the eternal love and the expression of that love by the 3 persons of the Trinity. I have always felt God’s love, but these last weeks have added more texture and a deeper

dimension to that love. What all this says about me is that I am still learning!!” (date noted as Final Reflection).

Response: “Yes! As I have contemplated His Triune nature my understanding of God has definitely been enlarged and enriched!! But I want to continue to grow in my understanding of the divine nature and what it means to share in it. I still have lots of questions. Reading *Life in the Trinity* has been such a blessing, but I need to read it again” (dated noted as Final Reflection).

Evaluation of Thesis-Project Hypothesis

Evaluating these written responses combined with the questionnaire surveys, I can say with confidence that encouraging Christians to think of God as He is, that is, in His Triunity, enlarges and enriches their life with God. While certain points of interest spoke to some in one way and to others in another way, I interpret these results to verify that my hypothesis was correct; not overly correct, but enough that I can surmise with humble confidence that engaging with God in His Triunity is transformative. That is not to say that each attendee had the same response to the retreat or interacted with the shared material in equal measure. It is also not to say that one weekend experience and a 40-day journal journey will transform and re-make a person’s relationship with God. What I heard through these responses and entries was an increased awareness of the Triunity of God. For some, this Triunity made God more approachable or loving than He had previously been understood, but not necessarily for all. I did notice that in several journal responses, the attendees speak of the “parts” of the Trinity, rather than the “persons” of the Trinity. While I did teach briefly on personhood, perhaps in retrospect I should have included more teaching on this and utilized the word “person” over “being” when

speaking of God's essence. This may have helped participants grasp the very personal nature of God that I was attempting to relay. What I know for certain is that transformation and growth take a lifetime. Like many of the facets of the spiritual life, it is that "long obedience in the same direction" of an open and active attentiveness to the presence of the Triune God in our midst that changes us.²⁶

This thesis-project took a lot longer than I had originally intended with a vast array of interruptions in the process. I experienced, like the rest of the world, a global pandemic, a Capitol insurrection, a culture of unrest and violence, combined with a retiring senior pastor (which put me as head of staff for about nine months during that time), in addition to a wedding of my oldest daughter, and our first grandbaby born to my youngest daughter. There were many moments that I thought about just forgoing this project, yet as I read over these journals and reflections, I am grateful that I did not give up. Trusting in God's never-changing being and character is what gave me the strength to carry on. I did have one of the retreat attendees come to share with me, in June of 2021, of the many ways God has continued to grow her life with him, in understanding the priority of his Triune nature. After we met, I asked her if she would put in writing what she communicated to me that day:

First of all, I'm writing this without the benefit of my notes so this is done completely from my memory, but this may be what you want—that is, to communicate what has truly stuck with me from your teaching on the Trinity and what has become part of who I am and how I see God. I have come to believe more and more in the truth contained in A.W. Tozer's quote that what comes to mind when you think of God is the most important thing about you. Your presentation on the Trinity has greatly informed my thoughts on God and has given these thoughts structure and boundary lines within which to operate.

On Friday night in your teaching, I can distinctly remember being caught up in the thought of being invited to participate in the life of the Trinity. I loved this thought as it conveyed to me that God, who has no beginning or end, invites me into something

26. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

eternal. I loved pondering that the members of the Trinity were present in the opening chapters of Genesis. This solidifies to me that we are not following the inventions of our own minds when we follow God, or Yahweh. Jesus was present as the Word, the Spirit hovered over the water and God the Father was the Creator, who pronounced His creation good. What an amazing gift to be invited into this eternal love, which I didn't make, but is making me.

Our knowledge of God and the protection of the purity of our knowledge of God has taken on more importance for me since our retreat. The substance of our knowledge is so important as Jesus pronounced to the woman at the well that the type of worshipers God desires are those who worship in spirit and truth. The Spirit and Truth are inextricably knitted together. How we view this is fundamental to our humility and how we treat other people, i.e., how we BE kingdom to others or how we bring kingdom. Our understanding is so important because it materializes in the physical world in how we see and treat others. For me, I'm realizing that this knowledge only comes about through reliance and dependence on the Spirit.... This is vital information for me, as a created being. I am not purely good and if truth be told, I have trouble discerning what is good, but I am able to take part in a relationship with One Who is Goodness Himself and I was created with the purpose of housing His Spirit and participating in a close, life-giving relationship which replicates the one which already existed within the Trinity. The description of this relationship as self-giving, other affirming and community building rang true to me and are a litmus test for me as I seek to discern God's calling and work in my own life and within the world.²⁷

Thus, I can say with confidence that, for at least one soul, engaging with God as he is, the Triune God, has enriched and enlarged a person's life with God. Thanks be to God.

Conclusion

Legend has it that Augustine was walking along the seashore and came upon a little boy who was pouring sea water into a hole in the sand. When Augustine asked the little boy what he was doing, the child responded, "pouring the sea into this hole." Augustine responded to the child that it would never fit and said to the little boy, "You are wasting your time." The child responded to Augustine in like manner, "And so are you, trying to write a book about God!"²⁸

27. Attendee C, e-mail to author, June 15, 2021.

28. Philip Ryken and Michael Lefebvre, *Our Triune God: Living in the Love of the Three-In-One* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 95.

There have been moments during these last few years as I have worked on this thesis-project that I felt the same as that little boy. Yet, living in a broken world that has lost its way, a world where so many people have lost their understanding of what it means to be a human being made in the image of the Triune God, I have been compelled to complete the work. I read and hear of the hopelessness, and increased suicide rates in people younger and younger. For example, when I was up in Montreat for the retreat weekend, I met with the new pastor for spiritual formation at Montreat College, Rev. Rachel Toone.²⁹ Rachel shared that the incoming class identified as generation Z (Gen Z), has more free time than ever before but are more anxious and depressed than ever before, because they have no purpose or direction. She shared that this generation of college kids are “not impacted by the sin paradigm.” She said they experience more shame and indignity, than sin. They have lost their sense of identity as a beloved child of God made for a personal and participatory relationship with him. Montreat is a private Christian liberal arts college, yet she said out of 149 freshmen, only a handful could articulate the Gospel. “In the social jungle of existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”³⁰ How we communicate the Good News of God, and how we present his character and being make a difference. She was encouraged by the work I shared and agreed fully that we need to find a language to communicate the invitational nature of God’s Good News. And I believe this not just for Gen Z, but for so many, both inside and outside our church walls who do not understand or engage with God as He, an eternal exchange of love.

29. Rachel Toone is a Whitworth and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary graduate and is ordained in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. I met with her on January 9, 2020, at 10:00am.

30. Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 130, quoted in Klyne Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1.

The question remains of what is the most effective and transformative way to communicate this mysterious Triune reality? Is it in a teaching format such as this retreat; is it incorporating this truth more it into my preaching and teaching; should it be a longer-term format such as a book study or small group? I would answer yes to all those questions, and I feel that the retreat weekend was only a beginning. I have definitely incorporated more of the Triune nature of God into my sermons and correspondence, as well as into my pastoral care conversations. I have been asked to lead another women's retreat with the same content at another church for about 150 women in February 2022. All that to say, God is continuing to lead me on this journey.

At the start of my formulation of this thesis-project, I discovered an older book in the bowels of a library entitled *Theology and the Cure of Souls*.³¹ The book was primarily concerned with the relationship between Christian doctrine and pastoral care. The dated language of the book profoundly spoke to my heart. It confirmed my belief that pastors uniquely have a responsibility to care and shepherd their flock in their life with God. The book begins this journey of pastoral care, otherwise known as "cure of souls," with the doctrine of the Trinity. Greeves agrees with D. M. Baillie that "That is the secret of the Christian life."³² Greeves continues:

The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to express the supreme truth about God and therefore is about matters of which our understanding must necessarily be incomplete; but the most immature Christian is a Christian because God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and because of what God does as Father, Son, and Spirit. How far, then, is it necessary for every would-be Christian to learn about the doctrine of the Trinity?³³

31. Frederic Greeves, *Theology and the Cure of Souls: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Manhasset, New York: Channel Press, 1962). This is the Cato Lecture of 1960.

32. D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Scribner, 1948), 154, quoted in Frederic Greeves, *Theology and the Cure of Souls*, 56.

33. Frederic Greeves, *Theology and the Cure of Souls*, 56.

“So theology has its rightful place within the pastoral care of the Church when it springs from love, is about love, and leads to love—love of God and love of our neighbour.”³⁴ God’s Triunity has always been and will always be. It is the mystery to which all are invited in. Can we rest in the beautiful truth that God indeed is the eternal exchange of love that changes each of us because God Himself is that love?

None of this need have happened, all of this.
These unexpected gifts, this overflow
Of things we know and things we’ll never know.
None of this had to be, but here it is,
The here-and-now in all its strange surprise;
A space to be ourselves in, and a grace
That spins us round and turns us to the source
Whence all these gifts and graces still arise.

And know the one through whom all this was made,
Whom we ignore, on whom we turn our back,
Whom we denied, insulted and betrayed,
Gather and offer for us all we lack,
Voices on our behalf creation’s praise,
And calls us to become the song he plays.³⁵

“Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

34. Frederic Greeves, *Theology and the Cure of Souls*, 177.

35. Malcolm Guite, “Strange Surprise,” a sonnet written for Jeremy Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 186.

APPENDIX A
PRE-RETREAT DOCUMENTS

Initial Correspondence

On Nov 8, 2019, at 8:05 PM, Leslie Dibble <lsdibble@wpc-clt.org> wrote:

Friends-

I have spoken with most of you about this part of my thesis project for my doctorate. I am trying to schedule a retreat of either one or two nights possibly in Montreat to do some teaching (3 times) and experiential exercises (worship/reflection) on the significance of the Trinitarian theology. Your participation is very valuable to me! It would entail a pre-retreat survey and a post-retreat survey and 7 post-retreat journal entries, and the retreat. I am trying to narrow the best dates with the most folks, so I appreciate your filling out this doodle to help me plan.

<https://doodle.com/poll/2umkdg62ybi4vxbf>

I am trusting God in this as I try and create a meaningful time together. I am grateful for your input.

Together in Christ-
Leslie

Weekend Welcome Letter, Background Information, Survey, and Journal Question

January 9, 2020

Dear Friends.

I am so grateful for your willingness to participate in our upcoming *God's Invitation into the Divine Life Retreat*. That you would be so giving of your time and energy and be so supportive of my attempt to attain my Doctor of Ministry degree, means more than my words can relay. I could not do this without you! The DMin curriculum and subsequent thesis-project that I am engaged in at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary is intended to help those in the program become more of a passionate reflective practitioner in the Church. My hope and prayer is that the time invested in this weekend and the days beyond, will not only be transformative and meaningful to each of you, but will also help guide me to become a more effective, compassionate, and thoughtful pastor. Thank you!

A few housekeeping details before the weekend begins:

1. Thank you for signing and either bringing or sending the IRB consent form.
2. This thesis-project is intended to be a safe place and confidentiality is of utmost importance. When you arrive at the retreat you, all will pick a letter from a random pool and that will be your identity going forward; the one you will use to identify your pre/post-retreat surveys and any and all reflections going forward. This is both to protect your confidentiality and vulnerability as well as guard against any bias I might potentially bring since I know all of you, ☺. I will not know who wrote what.
3. Please be honest! Part of my hypothesis is that thinking "Trinitarianly" changes people-but it may just be me! I trust you all to be honest with your interactions and thoughts.
4. Please fill out the following forms and bring them with you:
 - a. First is some basic background information.
 - b. Second is the first brief journal entry in response to a question.
 - c. Please bring these with you!
 - d. When you arrive, I will ask each of you to take a brief survey prior to engaging with the retreat group.

Thank you again for giving of yourself-heart, mind, and soul to this endeavor. I remain so humbled and grateful.

Together in Christ-
Leslie

Date:
Assigned Letter:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 1) Gender and Age
- 2) How long have you been a Christian?
- 3) How long have you been /or were you a member at Westminster Presbyterian Church?
- 4) Have you ever served in church or parachurch leadership? If so, how and what?
- 5) Have you ever had any theological training outside of the church setting? If yes, what?
- 6) Do you believe in the Trinity?
- 7) Why did you agree to participate in this retreat weekend and what do you hope to gain from this experience?

Date:
Assigned Letter:

REFLECTION JOURNAL ENTRY ONE
PRE-RETREAT

A.W. Tozer says that what you think when you think about God is the most important thing about you. When you think of God, your first thought is.....

Date:
Assigned Letter:

GOD'S INVITATION INTO THE DIVINE LIFE
PRE-RETREAT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please feel free to share very brief comments to further explain your response if necessary.

Please respond on a scale of 1 to 5 as follows:

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

1. When I think of God, I think of His Oneness.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

2. When I think of God, I think of the Trinity.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

3. When I think of God, I think of power.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

4. When I think of God, I think of beauty.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

5. I believe that what I know about God is related to what I know about myself.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

6. I understand salvation as primarily being saved from my sins.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

7. I understand a 'personal relationship with Christ' to be inviting Jesus into my heart.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

8. I know historically how the doctrine of the Trinity came into being.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

9. I believe the Trinity to be the ultimate truth about God.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

10. I believe the Trinity expresses the heart and nature of God.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

11. I believe the Trinity is important to my everyday life as a Christian and I am able to articulate that to another.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

12. I understand and experience spiritual maturity as union with Christ.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

APPENDIX B
RETREAT DOCUMENTS

Retreat Schedule, Teaching Plan, and Outlines

God's Invitation into the Divine Life
Retreat Weekend
January 10-12, 2020
Montreat, North Carolina

The Question: One- in-Three or Three-in One?

Friday January 10:

4-6 pm	Arrival
6-7 pm	Welcome Hour/Pre-retreat survey
7-8 pm	Dinner Together
8-9 pm	Teaching Time
9-10 pm	Sharing/Reflection/ Journal
10 pm	Rest

Our Response: Rediscovering the Trinity

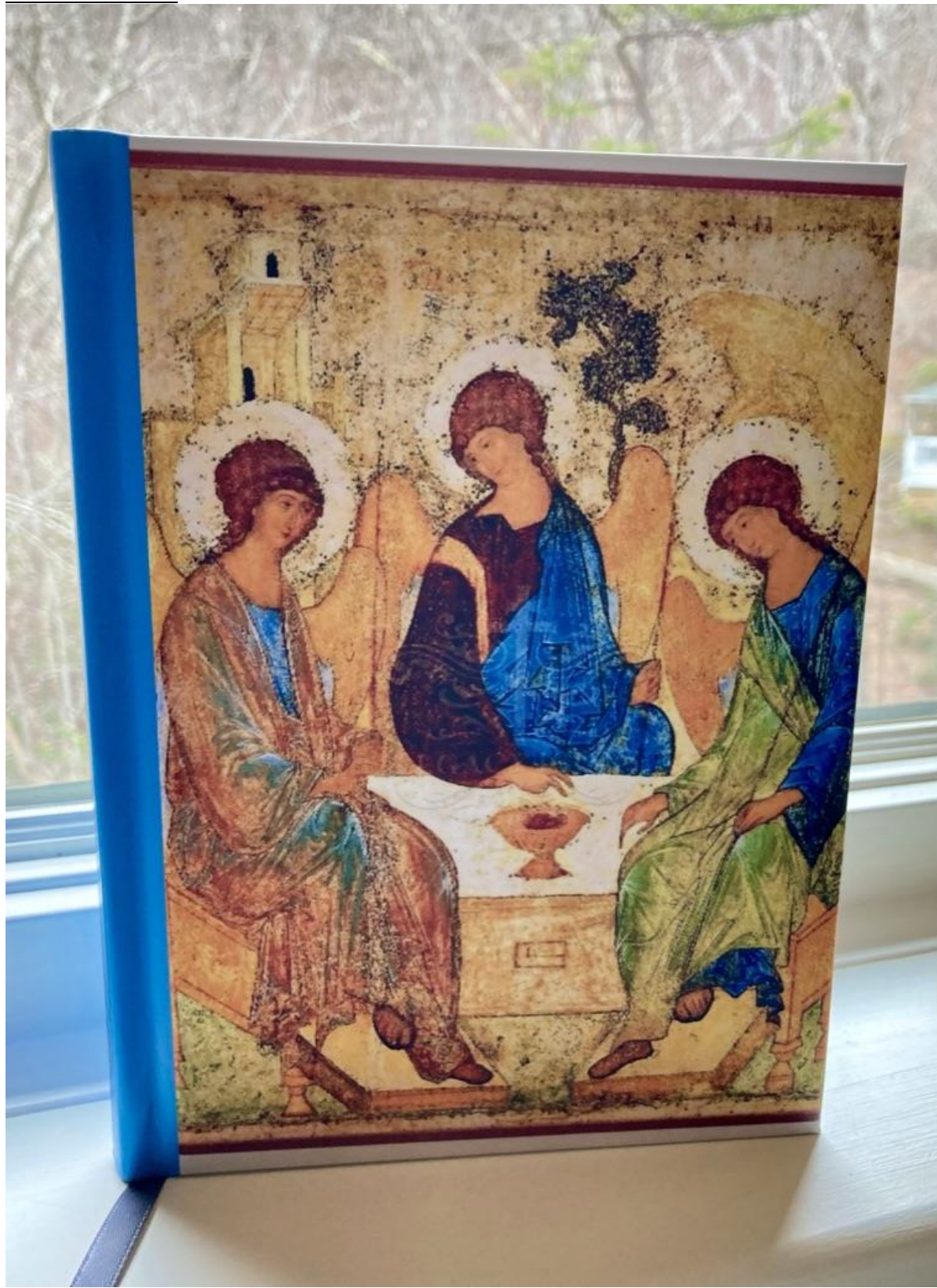
Saturday January 11:

8-9 am	Breakfast Together
10-12 noon	Teaching Time/ Artistic Response /Journal
12-3 pm	Lunch/Free time/Walks
3-5 pm	Teaching Time/ Icon Reflection /Journal
5-6 pm	Eucharist in Chapel
6-8 pm	Feast together
8-10 pm	Movie Night/Reflection/Journal
10 pm	Rest

Life Together in the Trinity

Sunday January 12:

7-9 am	Breakfast Together
9-10 am	Worship at Montreat Christ Community Church, Montreat NC
11 am	Brunch Out Together
12 noon	Reflection/Journal/Post-retreat Survey
1 pm	Departure



Teaching Outline Session I; Friday Evening

Who is this God?

- I. Introduction
 - a. “What comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you.” A.W. Tozer
 - i. One in three or three in one?
 - ii. Who is this God?
 - iii. What is this God like?
 - iv. Why does it matter; What difference does it make?
 - b. Prayer
 - i. Ephesians 3.14-21
- II. Theology should always bring life!
 - a. John Calvin- understanding of self and God
 - b. Ana-Maria Rizzuto- birth of the living God- God image
 - c. Nicky Cruz Story—significance of Trinity
 - d. My story/experience
- III. Brief History of Trinitarian theology
 - a. Early Church
 - i. Making sense of Jesus divinity
 - ii. Arian Controversy
 - iii. Nicene Creed
 - b. Enlightenment
 - i. Reason and science predominate
 - ii. Trinity doctrine to background
 - c. Current Resurgence of Trinitarian theology
- IV. Biblical Foundations of Trinity
 - a. God’s initiative to reveal himself and make himself known
 - b. Old Testament
 - i. Exodus 3, 6
 - ii. Genesis 1.2
 - iii. Isaiah 6.8
 - iv. Deuteronomy 6.4
 - c. New Testament
 - i. Matthew 28.10
 - ii. John 10.30
 - iii. John 17.5
- V. God is love- an eternal exchange of love
- VI. Shall we start with the one or the three? Does it make any difference?

Friday Evening Closing St. Patrick Prayer

I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through a belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
Of the Creator of creation.

I arise today
Through the strength of Christ's birth and His baptism,
Through the strength of His crucifixion and His burial,
Through the strength of His resurrection and His ascension,
Through the strength of His descent for the judgment of doom.

I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me;
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's hosts to save me
From snares of the devil,
From temptations of vices,
From everyone who desires me ill,
Afar and anear,
Alone or in a multitude.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through a belief in the Threeness,
Through a confession of the Oneness
Of the Creator of creation

Teaching Outline Session II; Saturday Morning

What is this God Like?

- I. Open in prayer
- II. God is Triune
 - a. God has always existed as an eternal exchange of love (John 17.24)
 - b. God is love (1 John 4.8)
 - i. To actualize love there must be relationship (Grenz/Augustine)
 - ii. Love speaks of the personal and relational nature of God
 - iii. God's free initiative of creation and humanity is an overflow of this eternal exchange of love. God choose to share his love, his life with his creation.
- III. Understanding the big picture of redemption³⁶
 - a. Why did God create us?to share in his love
 - b. What did we lose with the fall?.....our share in the Trinity
 - c. Why did the Son come down?.....to restore humanity to fellowship of Trinity
 - d. Why did Spirit come down?.....so that we could be united to Jesus relationship with the Father
 - e. Why will the Father come down at the end of history?.....in order to complete the share, the participations we have with the Trinity
- IV. God came in the flesh to redeem us that we might receive adoption as sons (Galatians 4.4-6)
- V. The being and relationship of love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is the same and equal in all three
- VI. This love is
 - a. Self-giving
 - b. Other-affirming
 - c. Community-forming
- VII. Story of a broken relationship healed with this love
- VIII. This Triune God is....
 - a. Mystery
 - b. Love
 - c. Personal
 - d. Relational
 - e. Merciful
 - f. Beautiful
 - g. Invitational

36. Donald Fairbairn, "The Trinity" (lecture, St. John's Episcopal Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, July 31, 2011).

Artistic Responses



Teaching Outline Session III; Saturday Afternoon

What difference does this make?

- I. Open in prayer
- II. God is as God acts (Karl Barth)
 - a. God is as God acts in salvation and sanctification
- III. 2 Peter 3.14
 - a. Early Church Fathers
 - b. Participating in the divine nature
 - c. Participating in the relationship the Son has with the Father (John 17:20-21)
 - d. Understanding our salvation as adoption and sonship (Galatians 4:4-6)
 - e. Salvation as life in Christ
- IV. Colossians 3:1-4
 - a. Life hidden with Christ in God
 - b. Set your mind on this reality
- V. John 15:1-11
 - a. Abide in my love
 - b. Understanding our sanctification as abiding in that relationship of love
- VI. Abiding
 - a. Mindfulness/intentional abiding
 - b. Feeding on Christ- Eucharist
- VII. Rublev's Icon Reflection Time
- VIII. Eucharist Service

HOLY COMMUNION

CELEBRANT Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

PEOPLE And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever. *Amen*

CELEBRANT Let us pray together: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name, through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

HYMN: *Holy, Holy, Holy*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. *Amen.*

MEDITATION *Come Unto Me*

Matthew 11: 25-30

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

CELEBRANT The Lord be with you.

PEOPLE And also with you.

CELEBRANT Lift up your hearts.

PEOPLE We lift them to the Lord.

CELEBRANT It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore, we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

*Holy, holy, holy Lord. God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*

CELEBRANT Let us pray: Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all. He stretched out his arms upon the

cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. *Amen.*

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me." After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

MEMORIAL ACCLAMATION

CELEBRANT Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:

ALL Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

CELEBRANT Let us pray: We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts. Sanctify them by your Word and Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom. All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever. *Amen.* And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to pray,

ALL Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

ALL We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body, and our souls washed through his most precious Blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. *Amen.*

THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

CELEBRANT Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us;

ALL Therefore let us keep the feast.

CELEBRANT The Gifts of God for the People of God: take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

*I am not my own but belong with body and soul both in life and in death
to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.*

CELEBRANT Let us pray.

ALL Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, and you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Send us now into the world in peace and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

THE BENEDICTION

Sunday Morning Worship; Christ Community Church

Sunday, January 12
8:00am: Intercessory Prayer, Gather 25
9:00 & 11:15am: Worship, GC
10:15am: Children/Youth Sunday School, THB
10:15am: FIRST Sunday School Class (College/Adult), GFH
10:15am: Adult Sunday School, Various
10:15am: **No Coffee in Bank**
12:15pm: College Welcome Luncheon, GFH
6:00pm: "50 Prayer for Revival", Gather 27
6:30pm: Bible Study, THB 1st floor

Tuesday, January 14
10:00am: Esther Circle, home of June Quick Stephens
2:00pm: Mary Martha Circle, Highland Farms
3:30pm: Highland Farms Bible Study
5:30pm: Soup Group, Highland Farms
7:00pm: Men's Group, home of Arla Yeaman

Wednesday, January 15
6:00pm: Prayer Meeting, THB 2nd floor
7:00pm: Chapel Choir Practice, Gather 27

Thursday, January 16
7:50pm: Naomi Ruth Circle, home of Deb Wagner

Saturday, January 18
9:00am: Men's Prayer Breakfast, THB 4th floor

Sunday, January 19
9:00am: Intercessory Prayer, Gather 25
9:30 & 11:15am: Worship, GC
10:15am: Children/Youth Sunday School, THB
10:15am: FIRST Sunday School Class (College/Adult), GFH
10:15am: Adult Sunday School, Various
10:15am: **No Coffee in Bank**
6:00pm: "50 Prayer for Revival", Gather 27
6:30pm: Bible Study, THB 1st floor

CCP: Chapel of the Messiah, GC, Graham Chapel, GFH: Gather Fellowship Hall, THB: The Henry Building

New here?
WELCOME!

BE SURE TO VISIT OUR CONNECTION DESK. WE HAVE A GIFT FOR YOU!

GRAB A WELCOME BROCHURE AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE CHAPEL.

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THE LORD GOD TOOK THE
 MAN AND PUT HIM IN THE
 GARDEN OF EDEN TO WORK IT
 AND TAKE CARE OF IT
 GENESIS 2:15

FIRST: Putting God First in Our Work
 Genesis 2:7-15

Date:
Assigned Letter:

GOD'S INVITATION INTO THE DIVINE LIFE IMMEDIATE POST-RETREAT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please feel free to share very brief comments to further explain your response if necessary.

Please respond on a scale of 1 to 5 as follows:

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

1. When I think of God, I think of His Oneness.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

2. When I think of God, I think of the Trinity.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

3. When I think of God, I think of power.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

4. When I think of God, I think of beauty.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

5. I believe that what I know about God is related to what I know about myself.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

6. I understand salvation as primarily being saved from my sins.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

7. I understand a 'personal relationship with Christ' to be inviting Jesus into my heart.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

8. I know historically how the doctrine of the Trinity came into being.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

9. I believe the Trinity to be the ultimate truth about God.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

10. I believe the Trinity expresses the heart and nature of God.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

11. I believe the Trinity is important to my everyday life as a Christian and I am able to articulate that to another.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

12. I understand and experience spiritual maturity as union with Christ.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

APPENDIX C

POST-RETREAT DOCUMENTS

Reflection Journal Assignments

1. Week 1 – emailed 1/12/20

Reflect on the past weekend during this up-coming week. What, if any things come to mind? When you ponder What is this Triune God like, do you experience any change in your mind, your experience, or your actions?

2. Week 2 – emailed 1/19/20

Karl Barth wrote “The triunity of God is the secret of His beauty.” Ponder this statement and reflect on it over this next week recording your thoughts in your journal.

3. Week 3 – emailed 1/26/20

Has thinking of God in His Triunity has affected your prayer life? C.S. Lewis expresses it this way:

An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But if he is a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God-that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying-the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on-the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that whole threefold life the three-personal Being is actually going on in the ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers.³⁷

4. Week 4 – emailed 2/2/20

Since you have been pondering God’s Triune nature these past weeks, have you experienced any change in the way you have interacted with reading, studying, or meditating on Holy Scripture? Spend some time sitting with this beautiful long one sentence that Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians and record your thoughts.

Ephesians 1:3-14 ³Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love in ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have

37. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 163.

redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ which he lavished on us in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ, might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Feel free to include other Scriptures that have spoken to you in new ways as you have engaged with God in His Triunity

5. Week 5 – emailed 2/9/20

As Christians we believe the Good News of the Gospel; that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins to grant us eternal life. This is an eternal and beautiful truth. Yet as I have engaged in the Triunity of God, my understanding of salvation has been enlarged. Reflect this week on your understanding of salvation. How would you articulate what God desires for all people? What are we saved from? What are we saved for? Why has God chosen to save us?

6. Week 6 – emailed 2/16/20

We spent some time at the retreat looking at 2 Peter 1.3-4: *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

The early Church Fathers understood sharing in the Father-Son relationship to be the foundation of what it means for us to participate in God. Reflect on how this triune understanding of participation in God has impacted you in any way.

7. Final Survey and reflections – emailed 2/22/20

1. Please take the attached survey one final time. (on next page) and answer the 2 questions following.

Date:
Assigned Letter:

REFLECTION JOURNAL ENTRIES
FINAL 40th DAY SURVEY AND REFLECTIONS

1. Please take the attached survey one final time.
2. A.W. Tozer says that what you think when you think about God is the most important thing about you. When you think of God, your first thought is.....
3. Briefly reflect on whether your approach and engagement with God has been enlarged and enriched as you have considered and contemplated His Triune nature. (Please be honest!)

Date:
Assigned Letter:

GOD'S INVITATION INTO THE DIVINE LIFE
40 DAY POST-RETREAT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please feel free to share very brief comments to further explain your response if necessary.

Please respond on a scale of 1 to 5 as follows:

Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4=Agree, 5= Strongly Agree

1. When I think of God, I think of His Oneness.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

2. When I think of God, I think of the Trinity.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

3. When I think of God, I think of power.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

4. When I think of God, I think of beauty.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

5. I believe that what I know about God is related to what I know about myself.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:
Brief comments:

6. I understand salvation as primarily being saved from my sins.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

7. I understand a 'personal relationship with Christ' to be inviting Jesus into my heart.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

8. I know historically how the doctrine of the Trinity came into being.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

9. I believe the Trinity to be the ultimate truth about God.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

10. I believe the Trinity expresses the heart and nature of God.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

11. I believe the Trinity is important to my everyday life as a Christian and I am able to articulate that to another.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

12. I understand and experience spiritual maturity as union with Christ.

Please respond on a scale of 1 through 5 as noted above:

Brief comments:

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **God's Invitation into the Divine Life Weekend Retreat**
Principal Investigator: **Reverend Leslie S. Dibble, Associate Pastor,
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina
Doctoral Candidate, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**

PURPOSE

This is a research study. The purpose of this research study is to evaluate the potential impact of Trinitarian theology on a mature believer's approach to God. The premise of this study is that many mature Christian believers, although they affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, do not think or live "Trinitarianly," when they approach God. This weekend retreat will involve a time of teaching, experiencing, and reflecting upon the transformative significance of first and foremost approaching God as He is; Triune. If my premise is correct, my hope is that this retreat will not only further deepen your relationship with God but will also help me as a pastor in my teaching and preaching and care of others in our congregation. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. You may ask any questions about the research, what you will be asked to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study because you are a mature believer in the God of Jesus Christ, exhibiting the fruits of a long life of abiding in Christ in character, practice of spiritual disciplines, service, and in relationships both in and outside the church. You are a person that I have had an ongoing relationship for quite some time and readily attest to these qualities

PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, your involvement will last for approximately 40 days.

The following procedures are involved in this study. You will be asked to fill out a pre-retreat survey and write one journal entry the day prior to the retreat. The weekend retreat will take place in Montreat, NC on January 10-12, 2020. The time there will involve three teaching times with structured response times involving both times of individual reflection and times of group sharing, several group activities that would engage in community building, a time of personal creative expression of the Trinity in some art form (writing, painting, pottery, music, poetry or other) and a worship service with communion. Upon your return home, you will be asked to fill out a post-retreat survey. You would then be asked to write at least one journal entry/week over the next 40 days reflecting on the experience and impact of the weekend. At the end of that time, I would have you take the survey again.

RISKS

There are no significant foreseeable risks to participating in this research project. The only potential risk could be a privacy risk of the writing in a journal that is accessible to the investigator. High standards of confidentiality would be kept as detailed below.

BENEFITS

The potential personal benefits that may occur as a result of your participation in this study are an enriched and enlarged relationship with God, and a deeper appreciation of the Trinity's presence in all of life including worship, Eucharist, Scripture reading and community.

COMPENSATION

You will not be compensated for participating in this research project. There will be no cost outside of your time.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records of participation in this research project will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your name will not be used. Rather your shared information will be recorded by coded names as "participant 1; participant 2; etc. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that you cannot be identified.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you agree to participate in this study, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to take part, or if you stop participating at any time, your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. If you withdraw only the data collected will be included.

QUESTIONS

Questions are encouraged. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Rev. Leslie Dibble, 704-608-0542, lsdibble@gmail.com. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Co-Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Dr. David A. Currie, at: dcurrie@gordonconwell.edu or 978-646-4176.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (printed): _____

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

RESEARCHER STATEMENT

I have discussed the above points with the participant. It is my opinion that the participant understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

(Signature of Researcher)

(Date)

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VITA

Leslie Hollister Smith Dibble was born in Atlanta, Georgia. She received a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Vanderbilt University in 1979. She worked as a nurse for over twenty years in clinical research until she felt God's call to seminary in 2000. Leslie received a Master of Divinity degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte in 2007. She was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in 2009 and has served as Associate Pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church since October 2009. She is married to Parkes and has two married daughters and one granddaughter. Leslie began her Doctor of Ministry Program in Pastoral Theology in June of 2017 and anticipates graduating in May of 2022.